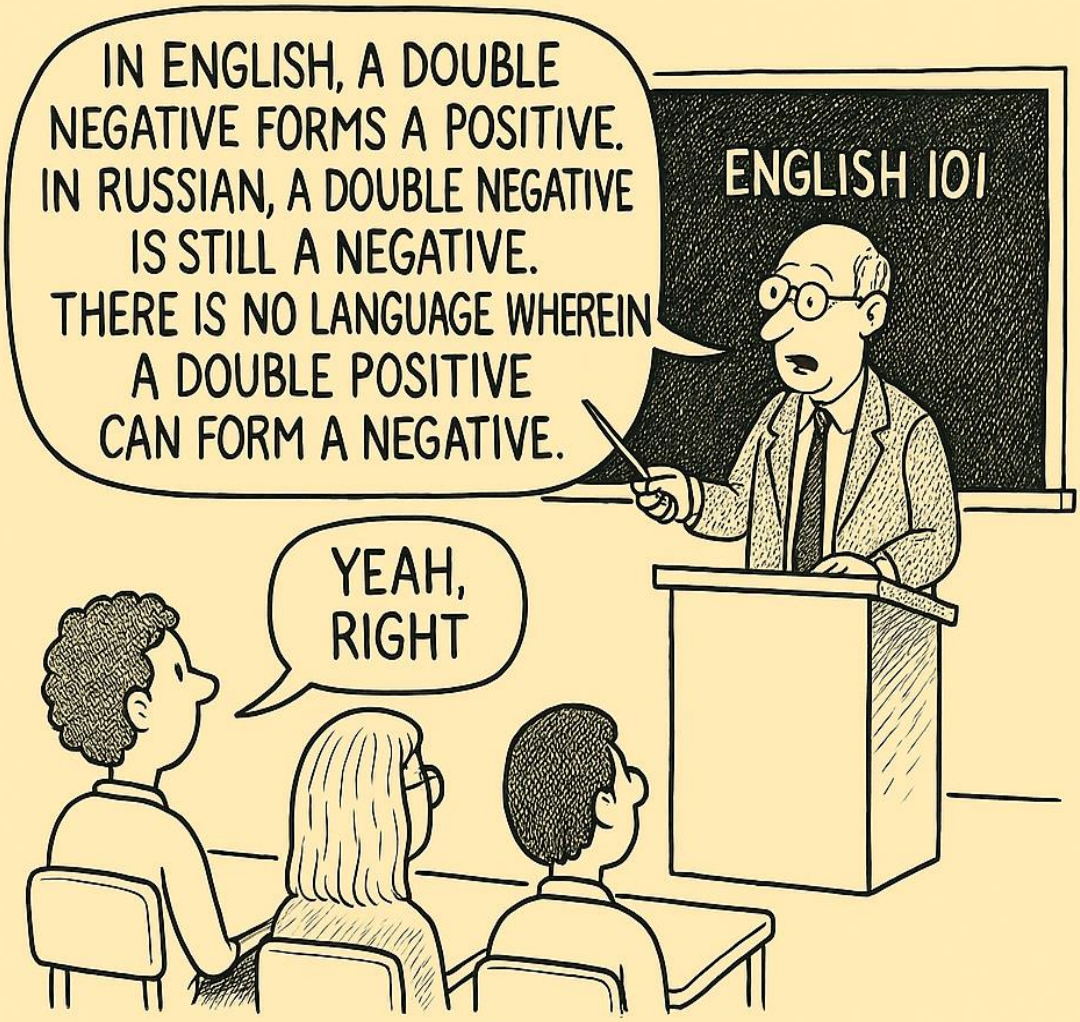
THE ANTI-LANGUAGE DIVIDE


IN ENGLISH, A DOUBLE NEGATIVE FORMS A POSITIVE. IN RUSSIAN, A DOUBLE NEGATIVE IS STILL A NEGATIVE. THERE IS NO LANGUAGE WHEREIN A DOUBLE POSITIVE CAN FORM A NEGATIVE.
ENGLISH 101
YEAH, RIGHT

by
Peter Ayolov

THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY
"The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."
Third part

THE ANTI-LANGUAGE DIVIDE

by Peter Ayolov

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Table of contents:

1. Preface: ANTI-LANGUAGES…….3
1.2. Anti-languages
1.3. Jargon
1.3. Slang and smart talk
2. COGNITION……..……26
2.1. Thinking
2.2. Inner speech
2.3. Righteous words
3. PHENOMENOLOGY…….……..52
3.1. The language phenomenon
3.2. The language of self
3.3. Psychophenomenology
4. PHILOSOPHY…….…….76
4.1. Philosophy of language
4.2. Theory of language
4.3. Meaning of language
5. LANGUAGING…….…….99
5.1. Languaging
5.2. Sociolinguistics
5.3. Applied linguistics
6. RHETORIC……125
6.1. From Gorgias to Derrida
6.2. Rhetoric of power
6.3. Corporate jargon
7. WRITING……152
7.1. Written language
7.2. Art of writing
7.3. How to avoid speaking?

1. Preface: ANTI-LANGUAGES 13870

1.1. Anti-language

(Codes of defiance: Cant, argot, and the language of resistance)

'Language is not merely a tool of communication, but a battlefield where the dominant and the marginal contest the power to define'.

— Norman Fairclough, Language and Power

'The creation of anti-language is the creation of a new social reality, one that denies the legitimacy of dominant norms'.

— James Paul Gee, An Introduction to Discourse Analysis

Speech as a disguise

Cant began as the whining song of beggars and ended as the cold chant of bureaucrats, priests, and politicians. Its etymology mirrors this trajectory. From the Latin 'cantare', 'to sing', and Old French 'chanter', cant once evoked the voice raised not in joy but in strategy—song as manipulation. In English, the earliest use of 'cant' (mid-1500s) described the rehearsed speech of the beggar. By the 1600s, it came to mean the secret jargon of thieves and vagabonds. Over time, it was used to describe any stylised, insincere, or exclusionary speech—a language not to reveal, but to conceal. Cant is not a dialect but a disguise. Historically, cant was never simply slang. As John S. Farmer noted in the 19th century, slang may be irreverent and informal, but cant is more enduring, more closed, and more performative. It belongs to those who need not just to name but to obscure: criminal underworlds, religious sects, political ideologues, even professionals. It survives not just through repetition but through its power to exclude, to bind insiders together by keeping outsiders out. Linguistically, cant exists in the shadow of another term: 'argot'. A French word for the secret codes of beggars and thieves, argot carries a similar spirit. Victor Hugo famously called it 'the language of darkness'. While cant typically describes the tone or posture of speech—its hypocrisy or self-righteousness—argot tends to refer to concrete vocabulary, the actual terms swapped in and out to keep the meaning hidden. Both, however, are languages of disguise. The hybrid speech of marginalised groups has always flourished on society's edge. And yet, as language evolves, so too does cant's home. What once belonged to beggars now flourishes in corporate slogans, political campaigns, and algorithmic 'engagement'. Cant today is not limited to the gutters but thrives in headlines and mission statements, often more hollow than sinister. In professional settings, cant takes on a different tone—part ritual, part code. Medical professionals, for instance, use abbreviations, acronyms, and in-group slang to accelerate communication and maintain authority. Though this language is not always meant to deceive, it nonetheless creates a boundary between the expert and the layperson. In the hands of marketers or consultants, cant becomes its own industry: a style of speaking designed not to communicate but to suggest competence, energy, or synergy—terms that glitter without grounding. Cant, then, is not just a historical curiosity but a living mode of speech. It is not defined by content but by function: speech that signals belonging, or speech that hides. Sometimes both. Whether spoken by beggars, bureaucrats, or brands, cant reveals the double face of language—its ability to connect and to obscure, to share and to segregate.

'Anti-societies'

Anti-societies are social groups that form in deliberate contrast to the dominant order, creating alternative structures of meaning, value, and belonging. Central to their cohesion is language—not simply as a tool of communication but as a mechanism for resistance. Michael Halliday coined the term 'anti-language' to describe the distinct linguistic systems of such groups. These languages go beyond slang or dialect; they rework the dominant tongue to construct new realities. Through relexicalisation, metaphor, inversion, and overlexicalisation, anti-societies forge vocabularies that encode opposition and define group boundaries. Their survival depends not only on physical separation or marginality, but on the creation of an alternative reality—and at the heart of this process is anti-language. Unlike ordinary dialects or specialised jargon, anti-languages are not mother tongues inherited within a culture. They are deliberately forged by groups that reject the mainstream, functioning as symbolic tools of resistance and resocialisation. Within an anti-society, anti-language does more than conceal meaning; it reconstructs reality from within the margins. This reconstruction depends on what Berger and Luckmann call a 'plausibility structure'—a social base where transformation is made credible through affective ties with significant others. In anti-societies, identity is not passively received but actively produced through linguistic ritual. Language here is heavily interpersonal, often formalised, and used to reinforce shared defiance. The new self is shaped not just through belief, but through daily conversation that asserts the legitimacy of the counter-reality. Anti-language is unique in that it is born entirely within opposition. Religious converts, for instance, adopt a new worldview, but one already normalised within an existing group. An anti-society, by contrast, creates a linguistic system that does not exist outside its defiant context. This is not a shift from one norm to another—it is the production of norms in tension with society itself. Tension, not distance, defines the boundary between society and anti-society. Anti-languages, like Grypsera or Polari, are clearly derived from dominant languages but serve different functions, reconfiguring familiar structures to reflect new social meanings. Individuals may move between society and anti-society, occupying intermediate spaces. As studies of criminal argot in Bengal show, language use varies across subgroups—criminals, near-criminals, and even students—each engaging differently with the anti-society's speech. This illustrates a spectrum of affiliation, where anti-language mediates shifting identities and loyalties. Ultimately, anti-language is inseparable from anti-society. It is the semiotic expression of an alternative order, born not of separation alone, but of conflict and contestation. Just as anti-societies resist dominant structures, anti-languages resist dominant meanings. They are not deviations from the norm, but parallel realities forged in opposition—speaking a world that would otherwise remain unheard. Whether subversive or institutional, the creation of parallel languages underscores a basic truth: language is power. Anti-societies use it not just to hide, but to endure, to define, and to defy.

Anti-languages

In his groundbreaking essay 'Anti-Languages[1]', M.A.K. Halliday explores how marginalised or oppositional groups create distinct linguistic systems that function not just to conceal meaning from outsiders, but to construct entirely alternative social realities. These systems, called anti-languages, emerge within what Halliday calls 'anti-societies'—communities formed in resistance to dominant social norms. Unlike dialects or sociolects, anti-languages are more than linguistic variation; they reframe experience, realign values, and sustain group cohesion through creative relexicalisation and metaphor. Halliday identifies

[1] Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). "Anti-Languages." In 'Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning', London: Edward Arnold.

several defining characteristics of anti-languages. Chief among them is relexicalisation: the substitution of existing vocabulary with novel terms for familiar concepts, especially those central to the life of the anti-society. For instance, Elizabethan criminals had their own term for a house that received stolen goods ('stalling-ken') or for teeth ('crashing-cheats'), just as modern prison argots or gang slang invent words for guards, weapons, or drugs. This continuous reinvention both preserves secrecy and enacts symbolic resistance. A second key feature is overlexicalisation—the creation of multiple synonymous terms for the same referent. Far from redundancy, this richness reflects the group's social preoccupations and internal hierarchies. The multiplicity of expressions surrounding key themes such as surveillance, betrayal, or violence often mirrors the group's lived anxieties and structures of power. Anti-languages also display a marked tendency toward metaphor and symbolic substitution. The language becomes a ritualised medium in which reality is re-coded. Its use is performative: to speak the anti-language is to occupy a position within the anti-society. In Polish prison slang, for instance, knowing and using the proper terms reflects one's place in the social hierarchy. Linguistic competence thus becomes synonymous with social survival. Halliday argues that these languages do not merely communicate an alternative worldview—they construct it. Drawing on the sociological theory of Berger and Luckmann, he proposes that anti-languages play an active role in the ongoing construction of reality. Through daily conversation, rituals, and storytelling, members of the anti-society reinforce the symbolic boundaries of their world. Anti-language becomes a form of world-building, a defence against marginalisation and assimilation. Yet anti-languages are not just tools of resistance; they are also susceptible to erosion. As the dominant culture absorbs their lexicon or neutralises their meanings, anti-languages must evolve. Their vitality depends on innovation and the constant re-creation of distinctiveness. Fictional examples, like the 'nadsat' speech of Alex and his gang in Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange', illustrate this dynamic. At first, 'nadsat' empowers the group to carve out a violent subculture, but it ultimately fails to resist the state's corrective apparatus. What Halliday's theory ultimately reveals is that anti-languages lie at the extreme end of a broader continuum of linguistic variation. They dramatise the sociolinguistic principle that all language is implicated in power, identity, and exclusion. In everyday speech, subtle linguistic choices already demarcate class, status, and affiliation. Anti-languages magnify these tendencies, offering an intensified glimpse into the mechanics of linguistic resistance. The study of anti-languages shows how humans use language not only to describe the world but to resist, transform, and reimagine it. These languages articulate the aspirations, fears, and boundaries of their speakers, serving both as shields and as weapons in cultural conflict. As Halliday suggests, they are not aberrations, but exemplary of language's inherent plasticity and its entanglement with social structure and symbolic power.

Fin de Siècle languages

In her article 'Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture[2]', Natasha Staller explores how late 19th-century Paris was consumed by a profound linguistic anxiety, one that permeated not only intellectual circles but also the visual arts. The period's artists and thinkers were confronted with a Babel-like fragmentation of meaning and language. In response, they turned to cryptographic systems, constructed universal languages, and subversive anti-languages—not merely as tools of communication, but as strategies of critique, mysticism, and identity formation. Staller maps out three major linguistic phenomena—hermetic, universal, and anti-languages—and shows

[2] Staller, N. (1994) Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture, The Art Bulletin, 76(2), pp. 331–354.

how they resonated with Symbolist art. Hermetic languages, such as military codes or private systems devised by occult societies, mirrored the Symbolist artists' own interest in secrecy and layered meaning. These were not simply techniques of encryption, but expressions of a deeper desire to transcend ordinary perception. Works by artists like Seurat or Gauguin are riddled with enigmatic forms and hidden references, resembling visual ciphers. The surface gives way to a reality withheld, where interpretation becomes an act of initiation. Alongside hermetic codes, Staller examines the rise of universal languages like Volapük and Esperanto, invented with utopian aims of erasing national divisions and fostering peace through linguistic unity. But this drive for universality was met with ambivalence. Artists feared that the simplification of language might flatten the complexities of experience. Universal languages, despite their lofty ideals, were seen by some as mechanisms of control, imposing artificial clarity where ambiguity was more truthful. Symbolist art responded not with simplification, but with deliberate complexity—a rejection of the idea that language could ever fully capture the world. The most radical response came in the form of anti-languages—linguistic systems born out of marginality and resistance. In fin de siècle Paris, 'argot', the slang of the criminal underworld, was one such form. These languages inverted dominant norms, creating a coded resistance to the bourgeois order. Staller argues that Symbolist artists adopted a similar strategy. Their fragmented, dreamlike works mirrored the structure of anti-languages: exclusionary, polysemous, and resistant to institutional interpretation. The rejection of linear narrative, the embrace of obscurity, and the fascination with silence itself all placed Symbolist art in direct conversation with the subversive potential of anti-language. Staller's broader claim is that artists at the fin de siècle were not merely reacting to linguistic crises but participating in them, reshaping language, and meaning through formal innovation. Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte', for example, is interpreted not just as a composition of dots but as a meditation on the instability of meaning—where forms morph and defy expectations, and a parasol might double as a moon. Like the shifting lexicon of an anti-language, the visual field becomes a space where no sign is fixed, and every object might carry multiple truths. The Symbolists' embrace of fractured language was less a descent into chaos than a deliberate refusal to accept imposed clarity. Their art, like the anti-languages they paralleled, was a protest simplification—a refusal to forget that language, in all its strangeness, is both a prison and a key.

Secret anti-languages

David Robson's article 'The Secret 'Anti-Languages' You're Not Supposed to Know[3]' explores how clandestine linguistic codes have evolved throughout history as both a form of resistance and a way to strengthen internal bonds. These anti-languages—spoken by criminals, prisoners, LGBTQ+ communities, or digital subcultures—represent more than just slang. They are systems of speech designed to exclude outsiders and build identity among insiders, often functioning as survival tools within oppressive or surveilled societies. The foundation of anti-language lies in relexicalisation: altering vocabulary while maintaining the grammatical structure of the base language. This transformation creates coded versions of familiar speech. For example, in the 16th-century Thieves' Cant, 'Rome' was London, 'bounge' a purse, and 'bowsing ken' an alehouse. This allowed criminals to speak openly in public while remaining incomprehensible to authorities. Such languages are often rich in metaphor, metaphorical displacements, and creative distortion—making them both poetic and subversive. Robson

[3] Robson, D. (n.d.). The secret 'anti-languages' you're not supposed to know. [online] www.bbc.com. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160211-the-secret-anti-languages-youre-not-supposed-to-know.

emphasises that anti-languages do not emerge arbitrarily but from necessity. Their function is twofold: secrecy and solidarity. In contexts of surveillance or criminalisation, speaking openly is dangerous. The British LGBTQ+ community once used Polari to navigate public life without exposure. Phrases like 'vada the bona omi' ('look at the handsome man') disguised queer identity within performative playfulness. Similarly, Kolkata's criminal underworld boasts over forty different terms for 'police', revealing both the pressure to evade detection and the cultural importance of linguistic finesse. The depth of these speech forms often creates internal hierarchies. In Polish prisons, mastering Grypserka—the prison anti-language—confers status, while ignorance invites scorn. Language, in this context, becomes a gatekeeping mechanism: to speak is to belong. Robson's research makes clear that anti-languages are not just communication tools but instruments of social structure. Contemporary equivalents extend beyond the street into digital culture. Censorship and algorithmic suppression have birthed internet anti-languages, particularly around sensitive topics such as sex work or political dissent. On forums and encrypted platforms, coded euphemisms like 'the hobby' or 'trolling' ensure evasion of filters. The pace of change online creates a fluid, adaptive lexicon that remains just out of reach of automated surveillance. In essence, today's digital anti-languages mimic the adaptability and resistance of their historical forebears. Cultural products often reimagine these languages as literary or artistic symbols. Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange' deploys 'Nadsat', an invented anti-language, to immerse readers in the deviant psyche of its protagonist. David Bowie referenced Nadsat in his lyrics, blending its rebellious aura with another anti-language—Polari. Films like 'Idiocracy' extrapolate this to absurd extremes, imagining degraded future slangs as critiques of social decay. What emerges from Robson's article is a portrait of language as not merely a system of signs but a cultural artefact of struggle and creativity. Anti-languages resist hegemony by reimagining the possible within speech. From Elizabethan thieves to online activists, these secret tongues continue to shape and shade the world's dominant forms of communication.

Nadsat

In 'A Clockwork Orange', Anthony Burgess creates more than a dystopian future of ultra-violence and state control—he constructs an entire linguistic world through the invention of 'nadsat', a hybrid teenage argot used by Alex and his gang. As Liberty Kohn argues in his analysis 'Antilanguage and the 'Gentleman's Goloss[4]', 'nadsat' functions not merely as slang but as what M.A.K. Halliday terms an 'antilanguage'—a linguistic system that sustains the identity, hierarchy, and worldview of a subculture opposed to dominant norms. It provides both a code of resistance and a social tool for constructing internal order, yet ultimately reveals its limits when pitted against the larger forces of societal reintegration. The antilanguage emerges within 'antisocieties'—communities defined by their resistance to the prevailing order. Nadsat, a melange of Russian, English, and invented idioms, fits this model exactly. It defines the gang's reality, marking inclusion and establishing boundaries. Mastery of its lexicon and style is a prerequisite for belonging, and its fluent use signals status and control. Alex, the novel's narrator and leader, manipulates nadsat with remarkable dexterity, which reinforces his authority over his droogs and enables him to deceive adults, including police officers and potential victims. His fluency lets him shift registers—from gang speak to a polished, middle-class tone—when needed to mask his intentions or gain trust. Language becomes a performance of power. For Alex, linguistic agility equals dominance. His gang operates less through ideology than through shared rhythms of speech, where irony, metaphor, and stylised violence

[4] Kohn, L. (n.d.) Antilanguage and the 'Gentleman's Goloss': Power, Style, and Linguistic Identity in A Clockwork Orange*. University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

form the basis of communication. When Dim, a fellow droog, fails to properly grasp or use nadsat's ironic codes, he reveals a lack of verbal intelligence and social finesse. This failure distances him from Alex, who physically punishes him, enforcing a pecking order through linguistic competence. The gang's social structure is, in part, a linguistic hierarchy. However, nadsat does not remain static. In prison, Alex is exposed to other youth groups whose speech patterns challenge his assumptions of linguistic superiority. His dialect, once an assertion of dominance, is merely one variant among many. This moment is crucial—it underscores that language, even within antisocieties, is unstable and competitive. Alex's status deteriorates as his speech no longer commands power. He is implicated in a crime by fellow inmates, a result not only of shifting alliances but of the collapse of his linguistic authority in unfamiliar social contexts. The twenty-first chapter of the British edition marks a turning point. As Alex matures and contemplates a future outside violence, nadsat recedes from his vocabulary. He visits Pete, a former droog now fully reintegrated into society, who speaks in standard English and views their past argot with condescension. Nadsat, once a weapon and shield, is now meaningless outside the context that birthed it. Its abandonment signals Alex's transformation and surrender to a normalised adult role. This trajectory mirrors Halliday's insight that while antilanguages are potent forms of resistance, they are limited by their dependency on opposition. Once the opposition is removed—either through suppression or integration—the antilanguage loses its function. In 'A Clockwork Orange', nadsat represents youthful rebellion, but it cannot sustain identity beyond that stage. Its brilliance lies in its artificiality, but this same artificiality renders it fragile. Burgess thus stages a critique of linguistic resistance itself. While nadsat empowers Alex, it also imprisons him within a juvenile worldview. The transition from violent rebellion to quiet conformity is marked linguistically: from creative slang to conventional speech. Language in the novel is not just a reflection of social reality; it actively constructs it. Alex's linguistic shift parallels a shift in being. He is no longer a 'droog' but a man considering marriage, children, and employment. Ultimately, Kohn's reading of 'A Clockwork Orange' positions nadsat as a textbook case of antilanguage—a vibrant, coded system of belonging and rebellion, doomed to obsolescence in the face of societal integration. As powerful as linguistic resistance may be, Burgess shows that language alone cannot escape the gravitational pull of social norms. The failure of nadsat underscores the paradox at the heart of all antilanguages: their vitality depends on the very society they aim to reject.

Heretical discourse

In her article 'The Anti-Language of Feminist and Queer Activism: Linguistic Norm-Breaking and Heretical Discourse in Croatia[5]', Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić explores how feminist and queer communities in Croatia strategically use language to resist deeply rooted androcentric norms. Croatian, like other Slavic languages, operates with strict gender agreement rules, reinforcing binary distinctions that activists seek to disrupt. Through the creation of what she calls a 'heretical discourse', these groups not only subvert existing grammatical structures but also reimagine the possibilities of self-representation and inclusion. Language is not neutral. It often serves as a mirror of dominant ideologies, embedding social hierarchies in its very grammar. In Croatian, the default masculine form is regularly used to denote mixed or unspecified groups. However, research consistently shows that listeners interpret these generic forms as male-specific, revealing the inadequacy of supposedly universal expressions. This issue becomes particularly acute in feminist and queer contexts, where the aim is to dismantle rigid gender binaries, not reinforce them. Kersten-Pejanić highlights the problem with false

[5] Kersten-Pejanić, R. (n.d.) The Anti-Language of Feminist and Queer Activism: Linguistic Norm-Breaking and Heretical Discourse in Croatia*, CAS SEE, University of Rijeka.

generics—masculine terms that claim inclusivity but evoke male imagery—and the ways Croatian feminists and queer activists respond. Rather than merely calling out these norms, they experiment with the language itself, challenging the gendered structure of pronouns, titles, and verbal forms. For example, feminine professional titles such as 'profesorica' or 'ravnateljica' have become common in Croatia but are still debated in neighbouring countries like Serbia. The act of naming thus becomes political; every suffix signals inclusion or erasure, defiance, or submission. Grammatical gender in Croatian functions as a form of linguistic policing. Sentences must conform to gender agreement, forcing speakers to choose a side even when they seek neutrality. Attempts to refer to women or nonbinary individuals using masculine forms end up excluding them; attempts to craft inclusive alternatives often clash with grammatical conventions. Yet activists persist, using irony, neologisms, repetition, and visual play to expand what is sayable and imaginable. These norm-breaking practices go beyond the surface level of speech—they constitute what M.A.K. Halliday would call an 'anti-language': a form of resistance coded into expression. This linguistic resistance does not just protest exclusion; it performs a new kind of identity politics. Activists create language that refuses to recognise patriarchy as the default and instead proposes a pluralistic grammar of recognition. Kersten-Pejanić's study places this Croatian activism within a broader global conversation about language and gender but remains sensitive to local specificities. Croatian's grammatical rigidity makes reform difficult, but also forces a confrontation with the ideological implications of every sentence. In breaking the rules, feminist and queer speakers reveal how language functions as a site of power—and a field of struggle. Through these heretical discourses, activists shape not just how people speak, but how they imagine themselves and others. Their linguistic creativity is a form of cultural rebellion, a refusal to be spoken for by a system that does not recognise them.

The argot of premillennialism

In his article 'Apocalypticism in America: The Argot of Premillennialism in Popular Culture[6]' (1988), Randall Balmer traces the vocabulary, symbolism, and cultural force of American apocalyptic thought, particularly the branch known as premillennialism. This form of eschatology centres on the belief that Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign, initiating divine judgment and a catastrophic break with history. Balmer reveals how this worldview has not only shaped religious subcultures but has also spilled into literature, media, and political discourse through its distinct lexicon and imagery. Premillennialism emerged as a reaction to Enlightenment optimism and postmillennial reformism. Where postmillennialism once thrived during periods like the Great Awakening—confident in the eventual perfectibility of society—premillennialism flourished amid growing social disillusionment in the 19th century. Figures like William Miller, who predicted Christ's return in the 1840s, and Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, brought biblical prophecy to the forefront of American public life. Although their specific predictions failed, the apocalyptic mindset endured, evolving into movements like Seventh-day Adventism and shaping later evangelical thinking. The language of premillennialism is filled with dramatic signifiers: the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Antichrist, the mark of the beast. These terms function not only as theological ideas but also as a shared argot among believers, distinguishing insiders from outsiders and reinforcing a particular worldview. Balmer shows how this language is embedded in both sacred and popular texts. The 'Scofield Reference Bible' (1909) was central in spreading dispensational theology, teaching that history unfolds in divine epochs, each with its own prophetic script.

[6] Balmer, R. (1988) Apocalypticism in America: The Argot of Premillennialism in Popular Culture, Prospects, 13, pp. 417–433.

Meanwhile, cultural works like Hal Lindsey's 'The Late Great Planet Earth' and the film 'A Thief in the Night' visualised the end times with cinematic urgency. This apocalyptic media shaped the imagination of entire evangelical generations, often emphasising fear, urgency, and divine retribution. Balmer also highlights the sociological function of premillennial rhetoric. In evangelical subcultures, it operates as a tool of evangelism—shocking people into repentance—but also as a form of protest perceived moral decay and institutional corruption. Figures like Dwight Moody and Billy Graham wielded apocalyptic messages to critique modern society while calling for personal salvation. Yet even as these movements preach withdrawal from a fallen world, they often become entangled in the very structures they critique. Balmer notes that despite the anti-world posture of premillennialism, it increasingly overlaps with cultural activism, particularly in the rise of the religious right, where judgmental language coexists with political engagement. Premillennialism's power lies in its ability to adapt—to retain its symbolic vocabulary while shifting its narrative strategy. Whether through pyramidal churches like Neal Frisby's Capstone Ministry or mass-market paperbacks warning of impending doom, the argot of the apocalypse remains a dynamic force. Balmer's essay shows that American culture has repeatedly turned to this language in times of crisis, finding in it both judgment and hope, destruction, and renewal.

1.2. Jargon

(Fluency and exclusion: The hidden grammar of power)

'Jargon is the verbal equivalent of a secret handshake: it defines who is in and who is out'.

— Richard Sennett, The Culture of the New Capitalism

Words that draw borders

Jargon is language that draws borders. It identifies who belongs and who does not, who speaks fluently and who fumbles, who commands the discourse and who must ask for clarification. Originally derived from the Old French word for bird chatter, jargon has always carried an undertone of noise, of speech that is meaningful only to those who understand its signals. Its lineage connects it to both the rhythm of insider belonging and the incoherence of exclusion. In modern usage, jargon refers to the specialised vocabulary used by specific professions, trades, disciplines, or social groups. It is designed for speed, efficiency, and precision within its field. While these terms facilitate high-speed communication between experts, they often render outsiders mute. Every discipline produces its own coded language, its own shorthand for accumulated knowledge. The terms are not chosen at random; they evolve with the field, shaped by necessity and the need for efficiency. Yet they also signal a kind of territoriality. Mastery of jargon is mastery of the space it defines. Jargon is more than vocabulary—it is a filter. Used appropriately, it grants access and affirms belonging. Misused, it exposes the outsider. This performative function gives jargon its power and danger. In job interviews, classrooms, conferences, and even casual professional interactions, fluency in jargon can substitute for deeper knowledge. A person who speaks the lingo is presumed to 'get it', regardless of whether they do. But this linguistic efficiency comes at a cost. For those outside the circle, jargon can become a wall. When a doctor rattles off a diagnosis without translation, when legal terms cloud an already complex contract, or when an academic cloaks a simple idea in convoluted terminology, jargon shifts from communication to obfuscation. Critics of such practices call for plain language initiatives, urging professionals to speak in accessible terms,

especially when the audience lacks specialised training. Yet the critique of jargon is not new. In 1782, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac observed that each science, in its effort to define and control knowledge, invents its own vocabulary. He warned that these terms often arise haphazardly and argued for a more thoughtful creation of technical language. His concern was not just about comprehension—it was about clarity, truth, and the risk of hiding ignorance behind complex terms. Still, jargon persists because it does more than describe; it creates identity. It is a social tool, a linguistic performance, a badge. In every industry or academic field, jargon signals that one belongs, that one has paid dues, studied the manuals, learnt the rules. For newcomers, adopting the jargon is part of assimilation. For veterans, it is part of maintaining authority. In the end, jargon reminds us that language is never neutral. Words serve purposes beyond meaning: they form alliances, stake claims, and exclude intruders. The challenge is to recognise when jargon builds bridges and when it builds walls. Knowing when to speak it—and when to set it aside—is the true mark of fluency.

The essence of jargon

Alice Becker-Ho's 'The Essence of Jargon[7]' explores how the language of the dangerous classes, often dismissed as slang or cant, constitutes not only a means of communication but also a structure of resistance and identity. For Becker-Ho, jargon is not simply a technical vocabulary but a coded, poetic, and tactical language developed within communities that exist on the margins of legality, capitalism, and institutional control. Her work traces the genealogy of this secret speech, formed in the underworld of thieves, beggars, gypsies, and rebels—those who reject the constraints of wage labour and state surveillance. Jargon, in this sense, is neither decorative nor merely cryptic. It is born from necessity. Unlike the language of institutions—polished, abstract, and intentionally transparent—jargon cultivates opacity. It is designed to exclude the uninitiated, to guard the group, to deceive the enemy. It divides the world between insiders and outsiders. The distinction is not based on class position alone, but on shared rejection: refusal to play by the rules of normal society. Jargon thus serves as both shelter and sword—a form of solidarity and a strategic veil. Jargon is shaped by mobility, displacement, illegality, and improvisation. It thrives in places where surveillance is heavy and trust is rare. To speak it is to join a lineage of the unspeakable—not only what cannot be said in public, but what expresses a worldview that must remain subterranean to survive. In the world of jargon, metaphors are never neutral. Language is constantly inverted. The words for friend, enemy, police, or betrayal shift with context and tone. A single phrase may mean its opposite, depending on who says it, how it is said, and to whom. This duplicity is not a flaw, but a feature—a dialectical tool for navigating a hostile world. Slang and jargon do not simply distort the official language; they reveal its pretensions. By twisting it, exaggerating it, mocking it, or refusing it altogether, the speakers of jargon expose how absurd the dominant codes already are. There is a sharp line between this form of underworld speech and the jargon of power. While the former emerges from struggle, necessity, and solidarity, the latter—corporate, bureaucratic, technocratic—serves the opposite function. It hides agency, enforces conformity, and turns communication into simulation. Whereas dangerous-class jargon sharpens difference, official jargon smooths it over. One defends a community; the other destroys meaning under layers of euphemism and abstraction. Though some words are politically problematic they function in the argot not as slurs of sexuality but as metaphors for submission or treachery. The point is not moralistic but strategic. In this language, betrayal is a form of vulnerability to power, and the highest sin is being turned, flipped, or bought. Argot has no patience for collaboration. Becker-Ho insists that this form of language is not just oppositional but poetic. Its metaphors

[7] Becker-Ho, A. (2022) The Essence of Jargon. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

are dense with historical memory. Its humor is dark and anarchic. Its ethics are situational but coherent. It is an oral archive of refusal. It is never fully recorded, never stable, never institutionalised. This is precisely why it remains vital. To write it down is already to risk freezing it. To analyze it is to risk violating it. What emerges is a vision of language as weapon and refuge. To speak in this way is not just to communicate, but to survive, to mock, to trick, and to endure. It is a mode of being that cannot be assimilated. The jargon of the dangerous classes is not a dialect waiting to be codified—it is a world unto itself, forever changing, resisting capture, and speaking in shadows. 'The Essence of Jargon' shows how power, solidarity, and resistance can be hidden inside the folds of everyday words. Language, when pushed to its margins, becomes not less but more human: less rigid, more alive, closer to danger and to truth. It is speech without state, law, or textbook. It is speech that runs, hides, and bites when cornered. It is the murmur of another way of life, overheard just beyond the edge of the dominant order.

Uses and abuses of jargon

In 'Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses[8]' Walter Nash begins his exploration of jargon by distinguishing between the noun 'jargon' and the more active notion of 'jargoning'—language not as a set of terms but as an ongoing process of invention, adoption, and performance. Instead of compiling a fixed dictionary of oddities, Nash maps out the shifting field of specialised and pretentious language across professional, commercial, literary, and bureaucratic domains. He confesses to collecting examples almost obsessively: scribbled during meetings, overheard at dinners, clipped from newspapers. Yet his aim is not only to mock, but to understand the role of jargon in language and life. Jargon may often be a vice, but it is also, paradoxically, a feature of how language grows and adapts. The word jargon refers both to technical language that serves precise communication within a field and to a socially motivated language of obfuscation. This second type, the target of most criticism, is the speech of inflated metaphors, vague abstractions, and pseudo-scientific terms used to signal authority rather than offer clarity. And yet, even this jargon has a function—whether to mark status, deflect scrutiny, or simply play a role in the theatre of professionalism. Professional or 'shop' jargon, though potentially confusing to outsiders, often serves a real need. It evolves within communities of practice to allow for fast, accurate reference. Over time, some of these terms migrate into general speech. Phrases like 'up and running' or 'touch base' began as technical terms but now pepper everyday conversation. Other examples, such as 'taken aback' or 'under way', began in military or nautical usage before becoming idioms. Nash notes that some phrases retain their professional flavor while others, once absorbed into everyday English, lose their specialised edge. But the real problem arises not from technical precision but from performance—the use of jargon not to communicate but to impress. This theatrical side of jargon, or 'show talk', leans heavily on abstraction, coinages, and metaphorical overreach. Nash recounts academic meetings where phrases like 'operating in the tutorial situation' or 'developing entrepreneurial skills' fill the air, projecting activity without meaningful content. In this setting, jargon becomes a substitute for thought—what George Orwell once called 'language designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'. In education, a course on bricklaying might be titled 'A Graduated Manual Skills Approach for Distance Learners', converting a basic skill into a bureaucratic mouthful. But as Nash shows, this is not limited to universities. Menu writers, advertisers, and journalists all participate in the same inflation of language, dressing beans on toast as 'golden legumes steeped in tangy tomato reduction atop artisanal bread'. The book traces how these patterns operate across domains. Metaphor becomes one of jargon’s most potent tools that lend a sense

[8] Nash, W. (1993) “Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses.” London: Routledge.

of crisis or expertise but often confuse more than they clarify. The verbal padding creates an illusion of fluency, which serves those who want to sound informed without being pinned down. Jargon, however, is not just an annoyance—it can be a weapon. 'Sales talk', the most manipulative variant, wraps hollow promises in grandiose phrasing. The timeshare industry, for example, does not sell holidays; it sells 'lifestyle investments in perpetual leisure assets'. This kind of language reframes ordinary transactions as mythic commitments. Political discourse borrows the same tactics. Policies are not implemented; they are 'rolled out in dynamic stakeholder environments'. Where sales talk is involved, the imperative becomes: 'let the citizen beware'. The real abuse of jargon is not its strangeness but its evasiveness. The danger is not in using specialised terms but in pretending that opacity equals depth. Some academic traditions, he notes, have gone as far as to celebrate unintelligibility as a kind of political resistance—arguing that clarity is an ideological trap. Jargon, then, is part of how humans perform their roles, signal group belonging, and assert control over meaning. It is simultaneously a creative force and a corrosive one.

Decoding the jargon

In 'Dog Whistles, Walk-Backs, and Washington Handshakes[9]', Chuck McCutcheon and David Mark provide an essential guide to the cryptic world of American political speech—a universe where euphemism, slang, and ritualistic phrasing dominate how power is communicated and contested. Political language has always been an exercise in performance, but in the modern era, it has grown into a dense thicket of coded signals designed more to obscure than to reveal. The authors argue that deciphering this language is not a niche concern for political insiders—it is central to understanding how power operates in public life. From terms like 'walk-backs' to 'document dumps', political communication today is calibrated less for clarity than for strategic ambiguity. This is not accidental. In Washington, language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. Mastering the lingo allows one entry into insider circles, while misunderstanding it can mark someone as naïve or an outsider. Even newcomers to government often find it takes a year just to learn how to interpret the constant stream of jargon. Worse, this insider vocabulary frequently spills into journalism and public discourse, where it is rarely explained, deepening the divide between political actors and the public. This linguistic fragmentation, though seemingly obscure, point to broader structural habits: the manipulation of legislative language, the performance of transparency, and the theatre of accountability. Political language functions not only to persuade but to signal affiliation and control. Buzzwords and euphemisms serve as verbal armour, insulating politicians from scrutiny while flattering their base. This is particularly evident in the media's coverage of scandals. Every new controversy now comes branded with the '-gate' suffix, from the serious (Bridgegate) to the absurd (Nipplegate). The authors trace this back to the original Watergate scandal, showing how its linguistic legacy has come to dominate public understanding of impropriety and accountability. Beyond labelling scandals, the media and politicians collaborate—sometimes unintentionally—in crafting and maintaining narratives. Soundbites are engineered for repetition: 'Don't double down on trickle down'— stick because they appeal to emotion and are easy to remember. These phrases are not accidental; they are carefully designed tools of influence. Yet political language also exposes its practitioners. Terms like 'blowback' and 'committing candor' highlight moments where the intended script slips. These moments reveal the tension between public relations and unscripted truth. Scandal management, too, has its own lexicon. Politicians 'walk back' comments when they go awry, stage document 'dumps' on

[9] McCutcheon, C. and Mark, D. (2014) Dog Whistles, Walk-Backs, and Washington Handshakes: Decoding the Jargon, Slang, and Bluster of American Political Speech. New York: Random House.

Friday evenings to bury bad news and often rely on a loyal spouse to generate public sympathy in moments of crisis. Meanwhile, hot mic incidents—where unguarded remarks go public—offer rare, unscripted insight into the political persona beneath the polish. What makes this language so powerful is its ability to define public perception. A 'zinger' in a debate can shift momentum overnight. A 'gotcha question' can sink a candidacy. And the pressure to always stay 'on message' is so intense that even a minor deviation can be parsed endlessly for hidden meanings. Each word or phrase is embedded in a broader strategy of persuasion, distraction, or damage control. From the media ecosystem's embrace of 'process stories' and 'tick-tocks', to the weaponisation of memes in debate culture, the authors argue that language has become the main battleground where political narratives are won and lost. Understanding this jargon is no longer optional. In a world where headlines are crafted to provoke, and where public debate is often reduced to slogans, being able to recognise and decode the language of power is a form of resistance. Without this literacy, citizens are left at the mercy of professionals trained to blur meaning while pretending to illuminate it.

Jargon unchained

Len Guff's 'Jargon Unchained[10]' is a sharp, entertaining takedown of corporate language at its worst. What might sound like harmless workplace phrases are, in his view, carefully constructed traps—designed to confuse, impress, and obscure meaning rather than clarify it. The book is both a satirical glossary and a subtle call to linguistic honesty. Rather than merely mocking office clichés, Guff traces their emergence and warns of the broader consequences they have on how people think and communicate in professional environments. The book begins with a confession: it might annoy the reader. And not without reason. Many of the entries—terms like 'best practice', 'cascade', or 'thought shower'—are so common they no longer register as odd. But once exposed to scrutiny, their absurdity is hard to unsee. Guff's argument is that jargon does not evolve to make communication more precise; it grows as camouflage. The more convoluted the language, the less scrutiny a speaker faces. And in a culture where performance often counts more than substance, these phrases help build entire careers around sounding busy while doing very little. One of the most memorable parts of the book is Guff's description of the 'Jargonista'—that smooth-talking office native who flourishes in environments where no one says what they mean. This person is fluent in syntactic gymnastics and deploys words like 'monetise' or 'leverage' as if they carried some arcane power. They do not. But they sound important, and that is enough to command attention in a meeting. What is really happening, Guff argues, is the substitution of clarity with complexity for the sake of status. Throughout the book, Guff annotates entries with dry, self-aware wit. For example, 'Business Agility' is defined as 'the ability to adapt quickly to changing market demands'—a euphemism, he suggests, for having no clear plan but pretending that is a strategy. 'Cascade', which sounds like a waterfall of enlightenment, usually means the top management will send an email and expect it to magically trickle down into behaviour. The term 'core competencies' is another gem—once a legitimate concept in management theory, now reduced to meaningless filler for slide decks. Even more revealing are the linguistic patterns Guff identifies. Turning nouns into verbs ('impact', 'utilise') gives speakers the illusion of action. Piling on modifiers ('value-added solutions') inflates otherwise empty claims. And vague metaphors like 'ducks in a row' provide the illusion of control and order, even when chaos reigns. According to Guff,

[10] Jargon Unchained by Len Guff (Ebook) - Read free for 30 days. (2025). [online] Everand. Available at: https://www.everand.com/book/246516171/Jargon-Unchained [Accessed 19 Jul. 2025].

these are not accidents. They are the hallmarks of a language culture that rewards noise over sense. Yet the book is not nihilistic. It ends with a modest proposal: speak clearly. Or at least think before speaking. Guff knows jargon will not vanish, but he believes that awareness can limit its harm. Like Orwell's famous warning against decayed metaphors, he urges readers to resist the temptation to speak in borrowed phrases just because they sound clever. After all, the point of language is to connect, not to conceal.

The jargon divide

In 'Shoot the Puppy[11]', Tony Thorne explores the peculiar and ever-shifting world of workplace jargon, revealing how it functions not only as a communication tool but also as a marker of power, personality, and professional anxiety. The titular phrase, to 'shoot the puppy', exemplifies the type of bold, unsettling imagery often used to disguise decision-making brutality beneath a cloak of cleverness. Thorne shows how jargon has become the accepted dialect of ambition—simultaneously admired and ridiculed. According to Thorne, office jargon exists in a liminal space: it is neither pure slang nor formal speech, but a hybrid born from business urgency, trendiness, and a desire to sound decisive without necessarily being clear. It promises boldness but often cloaks passivity. A manager may say 'we need to empower our verticals with a more agile approach', which could mean anything—or nothing at all. This kind of language has become ubiquitous, yet it continues to divide workplaces along generational, cultural, and psychological lines. A 2005 survey cited by Thorne reveals a generational tension. Mid-career professionals (aged 30–40) are most likely to use and defend jargon, seeing it as a kind of professional shorthand. Younger and older employees, by contrast, express irritation, and suspicion. Many perceive jargon as a bluff—a way to appear knowledgeable while avoiding specifics. Over two-thirds of respondents said they found such language irritating or insincere, and nearly half admitted to using it to impress others, even while privately disliking it. Jargon, Thorne argues, thrives in environments where status is fluid and ideas must appear novel to survive. It functions as both code and camouflage. Terms like 'footprint', 'heads-up', or 'deliverables' have slipped their original contexts, now used interchangeably in marketing, tech, logistics, and HR. Their spread reveals not just linguistic change but a cultural one: work has become performative, and language is part of the performance. Yet not all jargon is empty. As Thorne acknowledges, linguistic creativity is a natural part of English evolution. Terms like 'al desko' or 'smirting' reflect humor and social commentary, turning mundane habits into sly cultural observations. But when jargon turns from playful to prescriptive—when employees are instructed to 'cascade the message' or 'ideate solutions' on command—it begins to suffocate thought rather than inspire it. 'Shoot the Puppy' does not aim to ban jargon but to understand its strange appeal. Jargon reflects ambition, insecurity, and a collective desire to make the routine feel revolutionary. It mirrors a world where clarity is dangerous, and opacity is strategic. Through playful critique and cultural insight, Thorne opens a window into the psychology of modern workplaces—where saying little, in many words, can sometimes say everything.

Unbearable office jargon

In 'Who Touched Base in My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon[12]', Steven Poole charts the rise and reign of corporate buzzwords that have turned the modern office into a theatre of linguistic absurdity. These phrases—actioning deliverables,

[11] Thorne, T. (2007) Shoot the Puppy: A Survival Guide to the Curious Jargon of Modern Life. London: Penguin.
[12] Poole, S. (2013) Who Touched Base in My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon. London: Sceptre.

ideating solutions, pivoting strategies—fill boardrooms and email chains with a kind of ritualistic nonsense that is both numbing and oddly contagious. Beneath their shiny surfaces, such expressions reveal a deeper truth: jargon is not merely annoying—it is a tool of control, confusion, and coerced enthusiasm. Office jargon thrives because it serves multiple unspoken purposes. It allows individuals to sound important without saying anything substantive, and it masks conflict or incompetence beneath layers of agreeable vagueness. A layoff becomes a restructuring, a failure is a learning opportunity, and burnout is merely a capacity challenge. These euphemisms cushion the brutality of corporate life while simultaneously depersonalising it. Words that once had weight—team, value, vision—are hollowed out, recycled endlessly in slide decks and town halls until they signify little more than compliance. Jargon is not a modern invention. But today's version is uniquely expansive. It draws from the lexicons of sports, warfare, psychology, and Silicon Valley hype. Touch base, war room, circle back, move the needle—these terms leap across sectors, shaping a shared yet surreal dialect spoken by managers, HR reps, consultants, and interns alike. It is a language where solutions are sold before problems are understood, and where enthusiasm is mandatory, often enforced by smiley face emojis in email footers or 'culture fit' interviews that prize cheerfulness over competence. Poole's book does not just mock this phenomenon; it anatomises it. Behind the silliness lies something more sinister: jargon's capacity to enforce conformity and suppress dissent. The cheerful emptiness of phrases like leaning in or thinking outside the box discourages critical thought. The more people speak in buzzwords, the less they say. And when language collapses into cliché, thought often follows. This degradation of speech reflects the broader demands of emotional labour in contemporary work. It is no longer enough to meet deadlines or solve problems; employees must also live the brand, exude positivity, and bring their whole selves to work—while carefully avoiding any expression that might disrupt the harmony of the group chat. In this sense, office jargon becomes a behavioural script, a way of talking oneself into submission while appearing empowered. Poole's antidote is ridicule—sharp, knowing ridicule. By naming and shaming these phrases, he reclaims meaning from the mire. To laugh at jargon is not merely therapeutic—it is also an act of resistance. It reminds us that language matters, and that clear, honest words are rare and precious. In a world where corporate-speak threatens to replace actual thinking, satire may be the last form of clarity we have.

Talk normal

In 'Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle[13]', Tim Phillips takes aim at the bloated language of modern business and urges a return to straightforward communication. His campaign is not rooted in pedantry or linguistic purism but in the deep frustration of someone who has spent decades translating the convoluted into the comprehensible. Whether facing the slippery euphemisms of political doublespeak or the empty buzzwords of corporate culture, Phillips argues that plain language is not simply better—it is a moral necessity. Phillips begins by recounting his life as a journalist constantly stuck with the middle-tier executives and impossible-to-translate white papers. His central concern is not just the proliferation of jargon, but the culture of avoidance, vagueness, and self-importance that such language enables. He explains how words like solutions, stakeholders, and learnings are often used not to convey information but to obscure responsibility or inflate banalities into grand visions. The result is not only confusion but alienation. People feel lost in meetings, unsure of what has been said—let alone decided. What drives the persistence of jargon, Phillips argues, is insecurity masked as confidence. Complex language can make people sound intelligent or 'in the know', even when they are bluffing. But this kind of linguistic performance

[13] Phillips, T. (2010) Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle. London: Kogan Page.

does not serve the audience—it serves the speaker's ego. The irony is that real expertise is most often communicated with clarity. It takes much more skill to explain a difficult concept in simple terms than to wrap it in abstraction and acronyms. Throughout the book, Phillips returns to what he calls the principles of 'Talknormalism'—a modest manifesto for honesty in communication. First, be understood by everyone. Second, stop trying to sound clever. Third, focus on clarity of thought, not just grammar rules. These principles are not revolutionary, but in today's climate of polished vacuity, they feel radical. He illustrates his points with biting humor and personal stories, such as being trapped in long conference calls where no one dares to speak plainly, or watching politicians dodge questions with what he calls 'wombat diversions'—absurd rhetorical detours designed to distract and mislead. In one of the most candid passages, he tells the story of failing to speak up when a celebrity asked his opinion on a questionable career move. It haunts him, not because he could have changed the outcome, but because he missed the opportunity to say something honest when it mattered. This anecdote becomes a metaphor for everyday moments when people bite their tongues rather than call out nonsense—especially in the workplace. Phillips argues that this silence, born from politeness or fear, reinforces the very culture of evasion that jargon thrives in. 'Talk Normal' is not a style guide or a grammar manual. It is a protest. Against pretension, against confusion, against language that talks in circles. It is, at heart, a plea for honesty—for talking like a human being, even in the most corporate of settings.

The buzzword wars

In 'Talk Normal', Tim Phillips explores the murky battlefield where language is hijacked, reshaped, and weaponised to sell not only ideas but illusions. At the heart of this phenomenon lies the buzzword—a tool for dressing up the ordinary, hiding the unpleasant, or promoting the barely comprehensible under the guise of progress. Phillips begins by dissecting how buzzwords are used when a product or concept lacks real innovation. When there is nothing new to offer, language becomes the product. Marketing teams and corporate strategists, instead of improving services or telling the truth, tinker with terminology. A dull idea becomes revolutionary, a routine meeting becomes a strategy session, and failure transforms into a learning opportunity. The point is not to communicate, but to reframe perception. Nowhere is this clearer than in the rise of the word synergy. Once a term with real meaning, it became a rhetorical escape hatch for executives during mergers and acquisitions. 'Synergy' suggests mutual gain, alignment, and efficiency, but in practice it often means job losses, asset stripping, and culture clashes. It is an optimistic veil draped over the brutal logic of corporate consolidation. Phillips notes that its use in the press surged dramatically alongside merger activity—not because it was helpful, but because it sounded better than the truth. Another victim of semantic inflation is empowerment. Once tied to meaningful social change, it has been hollowed out into a marketing buzzword. A gym 'empowers' its members; a burger chain 'empowers' your appetite. It implies that people are being handed control, but really they are being handed responsibility with no guarantees. If the tool does not work, that is your fault—not theirs. Yet buzzword culture does not always win. The spectacular flop of 'awaycation', a term coined by a travel company to counteract the popular 'staycation', revealed something important. Unlike organically coined phrases that reflect real shifts—economic restraint, lifestyle changes—corporate neologisms born in boardrooms often fail because people can smell the inauthenticity. 'Awaycation' was rejected not because the idea of travel was offensive, but because the word itself was laughable. Buzzwords also bleed into government and politics, where euphemism becomes policy. Job cuts become re-careering, and raising taxes is rebranded as revenue enhancement. Such rewording is meant to ease public reaction, to deflect, and to confuse. But language, when distorted too far, begins to crumble. People start to notice, and

trust erodes. Phillips advocates for what he calls 'Talknormalism'—the radical idea of using language to say what one means. It is a quiet rebellion against the puffery, the vagueness, and the spin. Rejecting buzzwords does not mean rejecting ambition or innovation. It means demanding honesty over noise. The failure of 'awaycation' was not just a failed marketing attempt; it was a small victory for linguistic integrity. The overuse of jargon and poorly chosen metaphors is more than an annoyance—it is a barrier to understanding. When businesses rely on vague, feel-good phrases to sell products or ideas, they risk alienating their audience. Worse, they create a culture where clarity takes a backseat to the illusion of innovation. The war on buzzwords starts with a battle for less words. Small acts of resistance—clear emails, honest conversations, unadorned job descriptions—can push back. In a culture that overvalues noise, saying less, more clearly, becomes an act of meaning.

The jargon of authenticity

In 'The Jargon of Authenticity[14]', Theodor W. Adorno offers a penetrating critique of a particular mode of language that rose to prominence in postwar Germany—an emotionally charged, quasi-philosophical vocabulary that claimed to express inner truth, spiritual depth, and existential seriousness. But far from articulating anything genuinely authentic, Adorno argues that this language conceals ideological motives beneath its sanctimonious tone. Words like 'authenticity', or 'concern' have been systematically emptied of meaning, turned into linguistic signals that convey authority without content. Their purpose is no longer to communicate, but to seduce, intimidate, and reassure. They belong to a form of speech that masquerades as depth while avoiding thought. Adorno's attack is not on authenticity itself, but on the way the term has been instrumentalised. The jargon arose in part from religious and existentialist traditions, but in its secular form it abandoned metaphysical weight while retaining a sacred tone. This linguistic style, heavily influenced by thinkers such as Heidegger and Jaspers, adopted a voice of solemnity and revelation. It presented its statements as timeless insights into Being, yet often lacked clarity, argument, or connection to lived experience. The result was a language that cloaked banality in majesty. Adorno sees this as not only intellectually dishonest, but dangerous—because it lends an aura of profundity to whatever content it carries, including authoritarian and anti-democratic ideas. The origins of this jargon, according to Adorno, lie in a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and academic formalism. In the 1920s and 30s, many intellectuals in Germany sought new ways to express meaning beyond rigid logic or dry analysis. Existentialism, theological revivalism, and the cult of personal experience flourished. These movements cultivated a language of inwardness, one that privileged tone over truth, presence over argument. But once removed from its theological or philosophical roots, this language became untethered—free-floating signs of emotional seriousness that could be attached to any message. By the 1950s, this jargon had spilled into administration, education, therapy, business, and everyday life, where it began to function as a general code for moral legitimacy. Adorno emphasises that the jargon is not just a set of words—it is a way of speaking that appeals to authenticity while evading critique. Its performance of sincerity becomes a substitute for actual content. It simulates depth. The speaker does not need to prove anything or offer evidence; the tone itself suffices. The speaker is assumed to be trustworthy, not because of what is said, but because of how it is said. This is where Adorno sees the true danger. When people mistake performance for truth, language ceases to serve communication and begins to serve power. The jargon of authenticity is a symptom of 'damaged life'—a society in which

[14] Adorno, T.W. (1973). The Jargon of Authenticity. Northwestern University Press.

meaning has been hollowed out, where ideological forms persist without substance. In such a world, people long for meaning, but are offered only its shadow. The jargon fills this void by offering a ready-made style of seriousness, a language that feels profound even when it says nothing. It is seductive because it flatters the speaker and the listener alike. Both are elevated, reassured that they are part of a higher conversation. But they are merely circulating clichés. One of the most insidious aspects of the jargon, Adorno argues, is its capacity to naturalise inequality and authority. By presenting itself as beyond ideology—as a pure, authentic expression of human concern—it conceals the very structures of power it serves. For example, bureaucracies and corporations adopt jargon to humanise their image: they 'empower', 'care', 'share a vision'. In doing so, they deflect scrutiny and critique. The language implies moral purpose, even as the institutions act in self-interest. This is why Adorno insists that the critique of language must be part of the critique of society. The way people speak reveals how they think—and how they are ruled. In a world saturated with slogans and stylised sincerity, Adorno's critique remains relevant. The jargon of authenticity did not disappear with postwar Germany. It morphed and migrated, infiltrating contemporary politics, marketing, academia, and self-help culture. It persists wherever language is used not to clarify but to impress, not to question but to confirm. Such use of language serves the social order by discouraging critique. It turns philosophy into liturgy, thinking into ritual. The dignity it offers is a substitute for justice, the depth it promises a mirage. This is the real violence of the jargon: it invites people to see their alienation as destiny and their silence as truth.

1.3. Slang and smart talk

Slang

(Lexicons of belonging: The cultural force of slang)

'Slang is not just informal speech; it's a barometer of attitude, a signal of belonging, and a rebellion against linguistic stagnation'.

— Michael Adams, Slang: The People's Poetry

Slang

Slang is a language of edges, born in alleyways of speech where formal grammar does not reach. It thrives on the margins of respectability, yet it shapes how people live, laugh, and identify themselves. Slang can be understood not just as playful or improper speech but as a tool—sometimes a weapon—of social inclusion and exclusion. It colours expression, collapses distance, and adds flair to otherwise flat conversation. But more importantly, it serves as a marker of who belongs, who understands, and who does not. Historically, the term 'slang' entered English in the mid-18th century, first describing the secretive language of thieves and vagabonds. It did not begin as a celebration of verbal innovation but as a suspicion—language used by those up to no good. Its etymology can be traced to northern English dialects and Scandinavian roots, associating it with movement, looseness, and even straying, as in Old Norse 'slangi' and 'slangr'. Its journey from describing turf to the speech of those inhabiting that turf is telling. Territory became tongue. Language mapped identity. That identity was almost always group-based. Slang belongs to those who need it. It protects the speech of insiders and repels the outsider. This is as true of teenage slang as it is of prison lingo or military codes. Each slang word carries a history of usage, often submerged, and with it a tacit set of rules about who is allowed to speak it. Unlike dialect or jargon, which might reflect geography or profession, slang

is deliberately informal. It often challenges the propriety of standard language, not just for convenience but to disrupt, signal, or seduce. Slang is not merely vulgar speech—it is a conscious substitution, a cipher. It does not arise to clarify but to reframe. One might say 'croak' instead of 'die' not to soften the truth but to add bravado, mockery, or irony. Slang is performance. Its meanings are fluid. Slang captures emotion and fashion in ways standard vocabulary resists. It spreads through music, film, internet memes, and subcultures—speeding up in the digital age. What once took a decade to catch on now explodes overnight through hashtags or viral videos. But just as quickly, slang fades. Words like 'groovy' or 'rad' become relics, their punch dulled by overuse or commercial adoption. At its best, slang is democratic, open to innovation and wit. At its worst, it calcifies into clichés or exclusionary codes. But its enduring presence shows that people always seek ways to reinvent speech—ways that are faster, funnier, rawer, or more alive than official language allows. Slang lives where speech stretches toward emotion, urgency, and community, offering expression that is as loose and vibrant as the lives that shape it.

The people's poetry

In 'Slang: The People's Poetry[15]', Michael Adams explores the vibrant world of slang as more than a casual deviation from standard language—it is a living, poetic form of expression that gives voice to creativity, resistance, identity, and community. Rather than treating slang as linguistic graffiti on the wall of proper English, Adams positions it as a central element in the architecture of how people communicate who they are and how they belong. Slang is not a fringe phenomenon; it is the pulse of language in motion, shaped by context, invention, and the desire to speak with style and attitude. What makes slang so distinct is not just its vocabulary but its function. Slang is a linguistic performance. It marks in-group belonging and out-group exclusion, often communicating more about one's attitude and allegiances than about the topic at hand. A word like 'mongo', for example, feels strange and vivid—its origin in sanitation-worker slang and its adoption into public use show how such terms travel from private codes to shared vernaculars. The sound alone sets it apart from standard English, and this phonetic playfulness is part of its poetic charm. Slang often feels fresh because it sounds different, borrowing from noise and nonsense to challenge formality. Adams underscores that slang is not necessarily fleeting, as many assume. Some terms vanish quickly, while others survive for generations. The idea that slang is defined by its ephemerality is misleading; instead, its vitality lies in its flexibility. Words like 'smashed' or 'wasted' to describe intoxication have remained in use for decades, while new generations introduce their own twists. Slang may be short-lived in one form but eternal in function—it constantly renews itself in response to cultural rhythms. At its heart, slang is the poetry of the people. It thrives on metaphor, humor, rhythm, and surprise. Whether through internal rhymes, vivid images, or clever blends like 'chillax', slang captures emotional truth in compact, energetic forms. It speaks to lived experience in ways formal language often cannot. It is not merely expressive—it is subversive. To use slang is often to defy conventions, to wink at rules, to tell the world that language can be played with, not just obeyed. But slang is not always joyful. It can be cruel, exclusive, or provocative. Its irreverence can slide into aggression. Yet even this reflects its power—it gives speakers tools to resist, to critique, to laugh, and to wound. It is language unfiltered, language alive. Slang is what people say when they are not being watched, and in that rawness, it reveals something essential about human expression. Adams's study repositions slang as central, not peripheral, to language and meaning. It is the product of shared lives, of cultural collisions and improvisations. From bar slang to campus talk, from playground insults to hip-hop vernacular, slang reveals who people

[15] Adams, M. (2009) Slang: The People's Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press.

are, who they want to be, and who they refuse to become. Its instability is its strength, allowing it to move through generations, adapt across contexts, and resist easy definition. In the end, slang is democratic. It is not imposed from above but bubbles up from below. It is not standard, but it is essential. As Adams argues, it may not always be respectable, but it is always revealing. Slang is, in every sense, the poetry of the people.

Slang and group identity

In 'Slang', Michael Adams presents slang not merely as an informal variant of language but as a powerful marker of group identity and social alignment. Slang operates as a linguistic shibboleth—its correct use signals belonging, while its misuse marks exclusion. It encodes not only what people say, but how they place themselves socially, culturally, and emotionally within or outside a group. The stakes of slang are more than linguistic; they are symbolic acts of claiming or refusing identity. Adams highlights the delicate balance between authenticity and appropriation. To use slang convincingly, one must be immersed in the community that created it. The failure to do so reveals a lack of shared experience. This is most evident in attempts by outsiders to use African American Vernacular English (AAVE). When speakers not socialised in AAVE deploy its slang for effect—whether ironically or aspirationally—the result often rings hollow or offensive. Slang, in this sense, defends its borders. It is not merely vocabulary but a social performance that demands real credentials. The phenomenon of cultural appropriation is central to Adams's analysis. Many slang expressions arise from marginalised or subcultural groups as forms of resistance, wit, or social commentary. Yet when these expressions are adopted by the mainstream—often white, affluent speakers—they lose their critical edge. Words like woke, bling, or bae began in Black communities with nuanced meanings. But once they entered mass media, branding, and advertising, their depth was flattened into trendiness. Slang thus becomes both a weapon and a commodity—shaped in protest and then absorbed, repackaged, and sold. Slang is inherently dynamic, tied to performance and position. This flexibility allows it to carry social critique and humor, yet also makes it vulnerable to dilution. Adams notes that this cycle—resistance, adoption, and neutralisation—repeats across generations. The function of slang as resistance never disappears, but the specific words that perform this role must constantly be renewed. Crucial to this analysis is the concept of code-switching. For African American speakers fluent in both AAVE and Standard English, switching between registers is seamless. It reflects cultural fluency and situational awareness. However, when white speakers try to code-switch into AAVE, the result is often awkward or inauthentic. The difference lies not in linguistic ability but in the depth of cultural experience. Language here is not only about saying the right words—it is about having lived them. Slang is not bound to any group; it reflects the complexity of human belonging in all its dimensions. Slang further reveals cultural perceptions and stereotypes. What counts as 'slang' often depends less on the words themselves than on who is speaking them. The innovations, far from degrading language, heighten attention, semantic flexibility, and humor. These cognitive disruptions are not accidental. They are core to the social work slang performs. The surprise, the laughter, the shared wink behind a clever turn of phrase—these are moments of bonding and recognition. Slang is cognitive play with serious social stakes. It creates community not only by labelling the in-group but by activating shared knowledge, humor, and affect. At its deepest level, Adams suggests, slang operates like poetry. It plays with sound, image, rhythm, and metaphor to express what standard language cannot. It allows speakers to show they belong and that they are attuned to the absurdities of the world they navigate. Ultimately, slang functions as a mirror of society's tensions and desires. It tells us who we are, where we come from, and how we wish to be seen. It polices the boundary between insider and outsider while reminding us of the universal human need to connect, mock, resist, and invent

through words. As Adams concludes, slang is more than a linguistic curiosity—it is the people's poetry, a cultural act of speech that reflects the ever-shifting architecture of identity.

The future of slang

The future of slang is inseparable from the digital age, where language is constantly being reshaped by speed, connectivity, and self-expression. As new platforms emerge and cultural identities become more layered, slang will grow increasingly fragmented, personalised, and transient. Yet, despite these shifts, its core function remains deeply human: to build bonds, mark belonging, and stretch the boundaries of meaning. In 'Slang and Sociability[16]', Connie Eble explores this function through a detailed study of American college slang, drawing from over 10,000 examples submitted by students at the University of North Carolina between 1972 and 1993. What emerges is a picture of slang not as linguistic detritus, but as a vital means of negotiating identity, humor, status, and group solidarity. The language Eble documents is casual, often playful, but it is also strategic—a coded way of establishing and reinforcing social ties. College students, like other slang-producing communities, use language to claim space and shape experience. Their terms—whether for sex, alcohol, friendship, or frustration—reflect a culture of immediacy and peer connection. Slang acts as a shorthand for shared context. It is a living language, constantly in flux, deeply responsive to cultural moods and generational attitudes. In this sense, it behaves like fashion: stylish, disposable, and capable of marking both inclusion and exclusion. This communal function has deep roots. Medieval students developed their own subversive vocabulary to resist institutional control, much like their modern descendants. With each wave of social transformation—coeducation, desegregation, mass media—slang adapted, absorbing new influences and reflecting new concerns. Slang thrives at the intersection of creativity and necessity. New expressions will continue to rise from subcultures, social movements, and online communities, often marked by irony, resistance, or coded belonging. Digital media have accelerated the cycle of slang's invention, adoption, commodification, and abandonment. Memes, emojis, hashtags, and reaction gifs now function as part of this extended lexicon. Yet slang's increased visibility also makes it vulnerable to dilution. Once a term reaches mainstream popularity, it risks losing its original edge. As it becomes branded, commercialised, or parodied, its social charge weakens. Still, new terms always emerge to replace the old. The churn is part of slang's nature—it thrives on novelty and reinvention. At the same time, the boundary between slang and 'standard' English is blurring. Slang once confined to subcultures or marginalised groups is now embedded in mass media, advertising, and even politics. Expressions born in queer, Black, or youth communities now shape global vernaculars, a phenomenon both empowering and problematic. The mainstreaming of slang raises questions about authenticity, ownership, and cultural erasure. Yet it also demonstrates how central slang has become to modern speech. Interestingly slang rarely draws from academic or classroom language. Instead, it emerges from the emotional terrain of student life: relationships, self-image, pressure, boredom, joy. Slang avoids formal vocabulary not because it is anti-intellectual, but because it operates on a different register. It speaks to feeling, not function; presence, not performance. This makes it an essential window into how people live language, not just learn it. The future of slang, then, is both more democratic and more divided. Everyone has a platform, but not everyone speaks the same language. Slang will continue to segment by age, region, identity, and medium. What unites it is its role as a tool for social play and emotional economy. It is fast, messy, and volatile—but also rich, revealing, and resilient. Slang is never just about words. It is about people—how they signal intimacy,

[16] Eble, C. (1996) Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language Among College Students. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

challenge norms, navigate systems, and define themselves in a crowd. As the digital and social landscapes evolve, so will slang. But its fundamental role will remain: to give shape to the collective texture of lived experience.

Smart talk

(Speaking well, doing better: Language and impact in the age of performance)

'In public speaking, style without substance is performance; substance without style is missed opportunity'.

— Jay Heinrichs, Thank You for Arguing

Public speaking

Smart talk is a distinct form of language within the tradition of public speaking, characterised by polished delivery, rhetorical skill, and an emphasis on authority and persuasion in front of an audience. Public speaking is more than just standing in front of a crowd—it is a deliberate act of reaching out, of creating meaning through words, tone, and presence. From ancient city-states to digital platforms, the practice has adapted while retaining its core: the human urge to connect, persuade, and express. Regardless of setting, public speaking remains a potent tool for shifting perspectives, sharing ideas, and building collective understanding. Its roots trace back to classical traditions where thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero defined speech categories that still resonate today: political argument, legal defence, and ceremonial address. But the purpose of public speaking has always extended beyond these structures. At its heart, it is about shaping how others see the world—through logic, emotion, and story. At its core, speaking in public demands clarity and intention. A speaker must recognise the audience—not as a mass, but as individuals with their own assumptions, doubts, and curiosities. Tailoring a message means knowing when to inform, when to provoke, and when simply to listen. Whether calming fears or calling for action, the best public speakers adapt their approach to meet the mood of the room. Persuasion, prompting, and nudge are some of the most familiar goals. It asks the speaker to move others—not through brute logic alone, but through shared experience and emotional resonance. This might mean using repetition to stress a point, drawing on irony to disarm resistance, or offering metaphors that shift how something is felt rather than just understood. Even a single powerful story can move hearts more deeply than charts or statistics. Some of the most compelling public speakers, like those on TED stages, use their own lives as a bridge to wider truths, turning personal pain or insight into collective reflection. This type of smart talk is a linguistic intervention: a kind of speaking that does not just reflect reality but changes it. Here, communication becomes active engagement—challenging the dominant meanings of things and proposing new interpretations. The speaker does not merely inform or persuade but reshapes how people see the world. This kind of speech is not about one voice alone; it recognises the power of multiple voices in ongoing conversation, each one adjusting the meaning of what came before. Public speaking, then, is not a skill locked in podiums and microphones. It is a dynamic force—intimate and public, formal, and spontaneous. It lives in classrooms, courtrooms, rallies, and even casual conversations that unexpectedly shift someone's view. In a time flooded with noise, public speaking, at its best, cuts through: not by shouting louder, but by speaking with purpose. The tools may change—slideshows, live streams, AI assistants—but the need for thoughtful speech endures. When done well, public speaking does not just communicate. It uplifts, clarifies, and transforms. It is a dangerous weapon.

The smart-talk trap

In their article 'The Smart-Talk Trap[17]', Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton explore a common but often overlooked dysfunction in organisations: the tendency to replace meaningful action with articulate discussion. Many companies appear active—filled with strategy meetings, planning sessions, and well-crafted mission statements—but fail to implement real change. This gap between knowing and doing is not the result of ignorance but of a cultural bias that favours talk over execution. Ideas and solutions abound, yet tangible results are rare. The authors describe several real-world cases, such as a major metals company and a large furniture firm, where extensive internal discussions failed to produce action for months or even years. Despite having the right information and a clear understanding of their problems, these organisations stalled. The reason? An implicit belief that thinking and talking about change is equivalent to making it happen. One of the central culprits is what Pfeffer and Sutton call 'smart talk'—a mode of communication that emphasises sounding intelligent over getting things done. In such environments, employees focus on being eloquent, critical, and strategic in conversation, often without taking responsibility for implementation. Complex terminology, theoretical frameworks, and clever critiques dominate, but nothing moves forward. Smart talk becomes a substitute for real work. This dynamic is reinforced by business schools and corporate cultures that reward verbal agility. The loudest, most articulate voices in meetings are often assumed to be the most capable, regardless of whether their ideas lead to action. People are taught to dissect plans, question assumptions, and suggest refinements—but rarely to implement them. This creates a cycle in which execution is endlessly delayed under the guise of intellectual preparation. Mission statements offer a telling example. Many organisations spend months crafting elegant declarations of values and purpose, but these often remain divorced from everyday practice. Without accountability or mechanisms for follow-through, they become little more than rhetorical window dressing. In effect, the performance of being smart outweighs the need to be effective. Yet Pfeffer and Sutton argue that the knowing-doing gap can be bridged. Organisations that succeed in turning knowledge into action share several key traits. First, their leaders are directly engaged in the core work. Rather than remaining aloof in managerial abstraction, they understand the operational realities of their teams. Second, they communicate with clarity and simplicity. Overcomplication is seen as a barrier to execution. Such organisations also place emphasis on 'how' questions instead of 'why not' objections. Criticism is constructive, aimed at problem-solving rather than fault-finding. Practical mechanisms are put in place to ensure decisions lead to outcomes—like follow-ups, deadlines, and real consequences for inaction. Above all, they learn by doing, embracing failure as a necessary step toward innovation. Trial, error, and rapid prototyping can be more effective than endless theorising. In the end, Pfeffer and Sutton argue that success lies not in sounding brilliant but in building habits of action. Effective organisations do not just talk about ideas—they make them happen. As they put it, 'You can’t take words to the bank'. In a world filled with voices eager to speak, it is those who act who leave the lasting impact.

Speaking for profit

Public speaking has become more than an art—it is a thriving business. In 'Speaking for Profit[18]', Herman Holz offers a detailed and practical look at the professional speaking industry,

[17] Pfeffer, J. and Sutton, R.I. (1999). The Smart-Talk Trap. [online] Harvard Business Review. Available at: https://hbr.org/1999/05/the-smart-talk-trap.

[18] Holtz, H. (1987). Speaking For Profit. Wiley.

not as a form of performance, but as a commercial venture with real earning potential. The image of a charismatic figure captivating an audience is just one side of the story; the other, less glamorous but more consequential side involves contracts, fees, agencies, and strategies for breaking into the market. Holz's approach focuses not on becoming a master orator but on understanding how speaking engagements can turn into serious income. At the top tier of the industry, the rewards are substantial. When Prime Minister Menachem Begin was offered $15,000 per night by Harry Walker's agency, he quipped, 'I could leave a rich widow'. The joke underscores a truth—speaking can be remarkably lucrative, especially for those with public recognition. Agencies like Walker's represent high-profile individuals, including former presidents and media figures, who earn tens of thousands for a single talk. Yet, as Holz explains, the appeal of the industry is not limited to celebrities. Most of the market is composed of consultants, professionals, and authors earning per appearance. For these individuals, speaking is either a full-time profession or a powerful complement to their primary careers. A consultant may speak at conferences to expand their network, an author might present at seminars to drive book sales, or an executive may address industry gatherings to enhance corporate visibility. Even for professionals with no previous fame, building a speaking career is achievable with preparation, persistence, and a message that audiences find valuable. While the glamour of applause and prestige may appeal, the reality of the job includes long hours, frequent travel, and logistical headaches. Speakers must endure flight delays, poor food, and the solitude of constant hotel stays. Yet for many, these inconveniences are outweighed by the financial and professional rewards. Speakers often supplement their earnings through 'back-of-the-room' sales—offering books, recordings, or coaching services to their audience. Getting booked is another essential skill. Some rely on lecture bureaus to connect with clients; others build their own networks through self-promotion. A hybrid approach is common, mixing agency support with direct outreach. Regardless of the method, visibility and reputation are key. Successful speakers are often those who position themselves strategically in their fields, aligning their speaking topics with current demand and tailoring their messages to the interests of specific audiences. Seminars, once confined to academic or civic spaces, have now become structured and profitable enterprises. Fees for attendees are generating serious income for organisers and speakers alike. Holz's central point is that public speaking is a business—one with its own market, risks, and rewards. For those willing to treat it seriously, the path is open. With a focused message, an understanding of industry logistics, and a commitment to quality, speaking can be more than a platform—it can be a profession. Holz identifies three core requirements for success in professional speaking: having something worth saying, understanding the business mechanics of the field, and maintaining the right attitude—discipline, enthusiasm, and integrity. Contrary to the myth that speakers are born, not made, Holz insists that many successful speakers begin with no special talent, only the willingness to learn and adapt. Technical skills, voice training, or showmanship are less important than clarity, relevance, and professionalism. The demand for speakers remains high. Colleges, trade shows, corporate seminars, cruises, and industry conferences all seek speakers who can inform, entertain, or motivate. Subjects range from motivational topics and humor to specialised knowledge in marketing, technology, or leadership. According to Holz, professional topics dominate the field, as businesses look for speakers who can deliver actionable insights.

2. COGNITION

2.1. Thinking

(Thinking beyond words: Cognition, language, and the world)

'Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them'.

—Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language

'We do not think thoughts—we are thought by them'.

— Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition

Language and thought

The relationship between language and thought has long intrigued philosophers, linguists, and psychologists. At its core lies the question of whether language simply expresses thought or actively shapes it. Two prominent theories mark the poles of this debate. The first is the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which argues that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive and conceptualise the world. While the strong version—linguistic determinism—claims that without language, thought cannot exist, this has largely been rejected. The weaker version—linguistic relativity—suggests instead that language subtly shapes habitual thought, colouring perception, memory, and classification. In contrast, the language of thought hypothesis (LOTH) posits that thinking occurs in a kind of mental code—often called 'mentalese'—that is independent of any spoken language. According to this view, public language merely translates inner representations already formulated in this mental language. Thought, therefore, does not depend on linguistic input to exist, though the act of speaking or writing may refine or extend cognition by making it public, ordered, or re-examinable. Language plays several crucial roles in shaping how people think. It allows internal monologue, guides memory through verbal scaffolding, and facilitates the abstraction of complex ideas. Writing adds another layer of reflection, enabling one to revisit, clarify, and critique their own thoughts. In philosophical terms, language becomes both a tool and a limit—a frame that expands thinking but also bounds it. Empirical research lends some support to linguistic relativity. Cross-cultural studies show that speakers of different languages exhibit different cognitive styles, particularly in spatial orientation, colour discrimination, and number processing. In one famous case, Australian Aboriginal speakers who use cardinal directions (north, south, etc.) instead of relative ones (left, right) have been found to possess extraordinary navigational skills. In another, speakers of languages with limited number words, such as the Pirahã, show difficulty with exact quantities beyond two or three—suggesting that without words for numbers, certain kinds of numerical thought remain out of reach. Other influential theories further complicate the picture. Chomsky's view separates language from general cognition, arguing that language is governed by innate structures unrelated to other mental systems. Piaget viewed language as one among many cognitive tools acquired through stages of development, while Vygotsky emphasised the merger of thought and language in early childhood, seeing speech as transforming internal experience. More recently, cognitive therapy and behavioural economics have explored how the framing of language influences decision-making, mood, and motivation. A positive or negative formulation of the same choice can lead to entirely different outcomes. Finally, perspectives such as general semantics, E-Prime, and

non-sexist language initiatives demonstrate the ethical and cultural implications of linguistic framing. These approaches highlight how habitual patterns of speech can entrench biases, limit awareness, or restrict the range of viable thought. Even bilingual individuals may shift values depending on the language they are using, suggesting that language activates not just vocabulary, but entire worldviews. Taken together, these theories and studies reveal that language is not merely a vessel for conveying thought—it is an active participant in shaping how humans understand, imagine, remember, and decide.

Linguistic Relativity

Linguistic relativity is the idea that the structure and vocabulary of a language can subtly shape how its speakers perceive, think about, and experience the world. This notion, often associated with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, does not claim that language locks people into a fixed worldview, but rather that it nudges thought directions. It suggests that speakers of different languages may see, remember, or reason differently—not because of biology, but because of the habits of their language. The stronger claim, linguistic determinism, argues that language limits and determines thought. This has largely been set aside. Few believe that people are cognitively trapped by their grammar or vocabulary. Instead, a weaker form—linguistic relativity—has gained credibility. This version proposes that language influences attention, memory, and conceptual habits in subtle but measurable ways. It does not restrict what one can think, but it can influence how one tends to think. Historically, this view was shaped by anthropologist Franz Boas, who emphasised the cultural richness of languages previously considered 'primitive'. His student, Edward Sapir, built on this by noting that language and culture are deeply intertwined. Benjamin Lee Whorf then advanced these ideas, particularly through his study of Native American languages like Hopi. Whorf argued that because Hopi lacks certain grammatical tenses, its speakers may experience time differently than English speakers. His work was provocative, but often anecdotal, and later criticised for exaggerating differences or misrepresenting linguistic facts. Despite this early backlash, interest in linguistic relativity returned in the late 20th century with more rigorous research. Cross-linguistic studies began to find real, if limited, effects of language on cognition. Speakers of languages with different spatial systems—like those who use cardinal directions instead of 'left' and 'right'—often perform better on orientation tasks. People who speak languages with many colour terms can distinguish and remember shades more easily. Other studies have explored how grammatical gender, verb tense, or word order may affect memory, emotional framing, or moral judgment. The idea gained broader public attention through fictional explorations, most notably the 2016 film 'Arrival', where an alien language alters a human’s perception of time. This dramatic scenario is a fictional version of linguistic determinism, but the underlying theme—that language reshapes experience—reflects the enduring appeal of the relativity hypothesis. More nuanced theories, like Dan Slobin’s 'thinking for speaking', suggest that while language may not affect all thought, it does shape the way people organise information when preparing to speak. In this view, the act of using language calls certain features of reality into focus and trains speakers to attend to kinds of detail. Linguistic relativity continues to inspire research across psychology, linguistics, and anthropology. Its appeal lies in the recognition that language is not a neutral tool but an active part of cognition. People think with language, through language, and sometimes, because of language. While it may not define the boundaries of the possible, it helps chart the pathways of the familiar.

'Thinking for speaking'

In contexts of long-term bilingualism, where two languages coexist in sustained contact, Dan I. Slobin introduces the concept of 'thinking for speaking[19]' as a crucial cognitive mechanism guiding linguistic adaptation. This process refers to the mental framing of experience in ways that align with the expressive resources of a particular language. Slobin's research on spatial and motion expressions led to his theory of 'thinking for speaking', which argues that language shapes habitual thought patterns. This view, a moderate form of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, contrasts with Chomsky's notion of an innate language faculty, emphasising instead that language learning involves acquiring language-specific cognitive habits. For bilingual speakers, the need to articulate ideas across two linguistic systems often leads to the restructuring of how experiences are conceptualised and verbalised. Rather than mere lexical or structural borrowing, the shift occurs at the level of mental representation, where speakers must continually adapt their thinking to accommodate the grammatical and conceptual frameworks of both languages. Slobin demonstrates how 'thinking for speaking' can influence grammatical innovation, especially in areas where one language possesses morphosyntactic features that the other lacks. A central example is evidentiality—the grammatical marking of information source—which is obligatory in Turkish and many Andean languages but not in English or Spanish. In the Ottoman Balkans, several local languages developed evidential markers under the influence of Turkish, while in the Andes, Spanish adopted evidential forms under the influence of Quechua and Aymara. In both cases, the borrowing was not of surface forms but of conceptual routines: the cognitive demand to indicate how one knows something became internalised by speakers, shaping expression in the other language. This subtle transformation occurs because the cognitive system of a bilingual speaker becomes attuned to expressing categories that are salient in either language. The conceptualiser, a cognitive component in speech production, is forced to accommodate both linguistic codes and their demands. In the case of Turkish, speakers must always be aware of whether they witnessed an event directly or learnt about it indirectly. This awareness becomes habitual, influencing not only Turkish but also how bilingual speakers express themselves in languages like English, leading to an increased use of hedging phrases such as 'apparently' or 'it seems'. Slobin's framework reframes contact-induced change as a function not of random transfer but of systematic cognitive adaptation. The concept of 'thinking for speaking' shows how language contact is mediated by communicative needs and mental habits, not just structural compatibility. Evidentiality becomes a compelling case where the need to express a cognitively salient distinction pushes speakers to create new grammatical functions in their second language—using native linguistic material to fulfill foreign conceptual obligations. Thus, 'thinking for speaking' reveals the deep connection between cognition, communication, and grammar. It demonstrates how language contact leads to convergence not simply through borrowing, but through the speaker's persistent need to express familiar categories in new forms. In doing so, it expands our understanding of linguistic change by placing speaker experience, bilingual cognition, and communicative intention at the centre of explanation.

Life scripts and life stories

According to Dorthe Berntsen and Annette Bohn in 'Cultural Life Scripts and Individual Life Stories[20]' when people tell their life stories, they rarely narrate a chronological list of every

[19] Slobin, D.I., 2017. Thinking for speaking and the construction of evidentiality in language contact. In: A. Aikhenvald and R.M.W. Dixon, eds. The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–25.

[20] Berntsen, D. & Bohn, A. (2010) Cultural Life Scripts and Individual Life Stories. Cambridge University Press.

remembered moment. Instead, they highlight episodes—those that seem defining, significant, or symbolic. Milestones like falling in love, graduating, or becoming a parent are more likely to be mentioned than ordinary or unpleasant events. But the process of choosing what matters in a life story is not purely personal. It is shaped by culturally shared expectations known as 'life scripts', which function as mental templates for what a 'normal' life should look like. Life scripts are not invented anew by each individual. They are learnt and internalised through stories, media, social interactions, and institutions. In every culture, certain events are seen as standard or normative: finishing school, finding a partner, securing a job, having children. These events are not just statistically common—they carry symbolic weight and moral value. They structure the way individuals think about life stages and give shape to how people recall and recount their personal past. Although contemporary societies emphasise individual autonomy, life scripts remain remarkably powerful. Even in cultures that promote freedom and self-expression, deviations from the expected timeline—early marriage, late parenthood, or choosing not to marry at all—can attract judgment. Scripts also assign meaning to timing: getting a first job at 16 may be seen as admirable in one context and premature in another. The concept of 'on-time' and 'off-time' events shows how much memory is entangled with cultural norms. These scripts do not merely influence how people plan their lives—they also shape how they remember them. Research has shown that individuals disproportionately recall events from adolescence and early adulthood, a phenomenon known as the *reminiscence bump*. This memory peak coincides with the period when most culturally scripted milestones occur. It is not just that these years are emotionally intense; it is that they are pre-encoded as meaningful by the culture itself. As individuals mature, their personal narratives tend to align more closely with cultural life scripts. Children’s early autobiographical accounts often feature fantastical or highly personal elements—meeting a dinosaur, becoming a princess, or winning an imaginary race. Over time, and with social learning, their life stories shift toward culturally recognised events. The process of internalising these scripts appears to enhance narrative coherence: individuals who use culturally structured milestones tend to produce more logically ordered and socially intelligible life stories. However, life scripts are not fixed across cultures or eras. For instance, obtaining a driver’s license is a critical life marker in many American stories, while it may be irrelevant elsewhere. In traditional societies, puberty rites or inheritance milestones may carry more weight than formal education or romantic relationships. Scripts also evolve with social change—what was once taboo or marginal can become central over time, as with single parenthood or same-sex marriage. What makes life scripts so enduring is their dual function: they offer both guidance and meaning. They help people imagine possible futures and evaluate past decisions. At the same time, they provide a sense of belonging. Narrating a life that follows a shared script reinforces the feeling of being part of a community or generation. But diverging from the script can also be meaningful. People often frame unexpected events—such as illness, migration, or rebellion—not as failures, but as turning points that shaped who they are. In this sense, personal identity is not forged in isolation. It emerges at the intersection of individual memory and collective storytelling. Life stories gain coherence through the scaffolding of life scripts, yet remain open to reinterpretation. A life story can be retold in countless ways, each shaped by new experiences, shifting values, and the influence of others’ narratives. Life scripts give structure to memory, but they do not determine it. They offer a map, not a mandate. Within that map, individuals navigate their unique paths, sometimes following well-trodden routes, sometimes forging new directions. What matters is not only what is remembered, but how those memories are assembled into a meaningful whole—one that connects the personal with the cultural, the remembered with the imagined.

Planning of speech production

Inner speech plays a crucial role in the mental organisation of language, especially during the transition from thought to spoken expression. A.A. Leontiev[21], one of the leading figures in Soviet psycholinguistics, developed a model that locates inner speech at the heart of the planning process in speech production. Rather than being a byproduct of verbal expression, inner speech actively prepares the speaker's thoughts for articulation, acting as a bridge between internal cognition and external communication. Leontiev's framework breaks speech production into two broad stages: planning and execution. The planning stage itself is subdivided into motive, intention, and inner programming. A motive arises from a communicative need or a situation requiring verbal response. This is followed by a speech intention—an emerging idea of what should be expressed. Only then does the speaker engage in inner programming, where the idea is mentally rehearsed, ordered, and structured. Here, inner speech takes shape in a way distinct from external speech: abbreviated, personal, and tailored to meaning rather than grammar. It encodes subjective meanings that are often too fluid or implicit to be fully articulated in words. In the execution phase, these internal meanings are translated into grammatical and lexical structures fit for external use. Leontiev describes this as a post-programming process where the inner, sense-based formulations are converted into concrete linguistic forms and finally articulated through motor commands. Thus, inner speech serves not just as a private rehearsal, but as an essential organiser of thought, managing both content and intention before language emerges in social space. Leontiev's insight becomes even more illuminating when applied to second language (L2) contexts. Learners of an L2, especially in early stages, rarely formulate thoughts directly in the target language. Instead, they pass through a 'translation stage' in which ideas are first structured using the native language (L1), then consciously translated into L2 forms. This translation process lengthens the planning stage, requiring an additional layer of cognitive mediation. With increased proficiency, some learners report bypassing this stage and generating inner speech directly in the second language—a sign of deeper internalisation. Leontiev also notes that elements of the second language can appear unpredictably in the inner speech of learners. These fragments are not yet stable or systematic but reflect the beginning of L2 integration into the mind's architecture. Over time, with practice and immersion, this randomness gives way to more stable inner L2 structures. What began as translation becomes internal composition. Understanding inner speech through Leontiev's lens helps clarify how humans prepare language in silence before speaking. It reveals the mind's subtle and layered choreography—from impulse to utterance—and helps explain why thinking in a second language is not simply a matter of translation, but a gradual reconfiguration of the mechanisms of thought itself.

Cognitive linguistics

George Lakoff's 'Ten Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics[22]' dismantles the traditional notion that language is a disembodied system of symbols pointing toward a neutral world of facts. Instead, he proposes that meaning emerges from the embodied mind—from neural patterns shaped by our bodies, actions, perceptions, and social environments. In this view, language is not a mirror of reality but a mechanism for constructing it. The mind does not simply label the world; it interprets, filters, and reshapes it through metaphor, categorisation, and frame structures. At the centre of cognitive linguistics is the rejection of the classical view of categories as fixed sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. Traditional semantics would treat something like 'bird' as a stable list of features shared by all members. But experiments by

[21] Guerrero, M.C.M. de (2005) Thinking Words in a Second Language, Westport, CT: Praeger.
[22] Lakoff, G. (2019) Ten Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics. Leiden: Brill.

Eleanor Rosch showed that some members—like robins—are more prototypical than others, like ostriches or penguins. Humans think in terms of these prototypes, not abstract definitions. Categories are graded, and typicality affects how quickly one recognises or reasons about examples. This challenges the assumption of binary inclusion and reveals that real cognition operates along a spectrum. A lemon is not just any used car; it is a nightmare prototype. A prince may be a prototypical 'hero', but a bureaucrat likely is not. Lakoff shows how such distinctions influence not only recognition but also moral and political reasoning. Conceptual metaphors further reveal that abstract domains are understood through concrete experiences. Time, for instance, is treated like space: people look 'forward' to the future and 'leave the past behind'. Love becomes a journey ('We're at a crossroads'), anger becomes heat ('He's boiling with rage'), and ideas become objects to be grasped or dropped. These metaphors are not decorative but constitutive of meaning. They shape how one frames problems, chooses policies, or feels about events. Moreover, cognitive linguistics emphasises embodiment. Human experiences—standing upright, seeing forward, manipulating tools—structure the metaphorical mapping of concepts. The vertical axis encodes power ('high status'), quantity ('prices went up'), or control ('she's above reproach'). Even math is rooted in the body's interaction with the world: more is up because adding water to a glass makes the level rise. These metaphorical mappings correspond to neural circuits, not philosophical abstractions. Language is also structured by frames—networks of background knowledge that shape understanding. A word like 'sell' presupposes a buyer, goods, money, and an exchange. Without invoking the entire frame, meaning collapses. Political language exploits these structures: 'tax relief' assumes taxation is a burden; 'welfare' evokes a recipient frame that can be either nurturing or parasitic, depending on metaphorical context. Lakoff's theory explains why persuasion is not just about facts but about framing. Competing frames make certain facts visible. A protest can be a riot or a revolution depending on which frame is activated. People do not change their minds by receiving more data, but by shifting the metaphors and categories through which they interpret the data. Cognitive linguistics thus returns language to its human roots. Meaning is not floating in a Platonic realm of truths, nor is it stored in dictionaries. It is enacted, constructed, and embodied. The grammar of a language is not a logical scaffold but a choreography of thought, feeling, and perception. Understanding language means understanding the mind—and vice versa. Lakoff's work shifts the task of linguistics from cataloguing external reference to understanding internal structure. It redefines semantics as an embodied, dynamic, and interpretive activity. Meaning is never neutral because cognition never is. Thought itself is metaphorical, and metaphor begins in the body.

The structure of grammar

In his Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics, George Lakoff challenges the traditional view of grammar as a system governed primarily by abstract rules of syntax. Instead, he emphasises constructions—conventional pairings of form and meaning—as the fundamental building blocks of grammar. One key example is the deictic locative construction, as seen in a sentence like 'There's John'. Though syntactically simple on the surface, this utterance expresses a highly contextual and embodied act of pointing. Its meaning depends not only on the grammatical components but also on shared attention and physical presence. This explains why it resists negation ('There isn't John') or embedding ('I believe there's John'), which would undermine its function as an immediate, performative act. Children acquire such constructions early because they map directly onto perceptual experiences. Saying 'There's John' while seeing John in the room is a seamless integration of vision, reference, and speech. According to Lakoff, constructions like this show that grammar is deeply grounded in bodily interaction with the world, not detached logical structures. Lakoff also distinguishes the deictic locative from the

existential construction, as in 'There is a fly on the wall'. While both begin with 'there', the existential construction makes an ontological claim—it asserts that something exists somewhere. It is not tied to shared attention or immediate context, and it allows negation, questioning, and embedding. Its 'there' lacks stress and is semantically empty, functioning mainly to fulfill syntactic positioning. These subtle contrasts illustrate that constructions are not simply templates filled with interchangeable parts, but holistic units with specific functions and meanings. Cognitive linguistics holds that variations of a construction, like those of 'there', arise from minimal adjustments to basic patterns. Some extensions are metaphorical. In the 'delivery deictic' ('Here's your soup'), the act of presenting food is framed as delivering presence. In the 'awe variant' ('There was a king!'), emotional salience shapes the structure, emphasising an imaginative or retrospective presence. In the 'activity-started deictic' ('There he goes again'), repetition and expectation are layered onto the pointing gesture. Each variant retains the core notion of spatial orientation but adapts it to new contexts, linking grammar with the dynamics of thought. This view upends the Chomskyan model of grammar as an autonomous, generative system. Instead, grammar is seen as a network of learnt constructions, stored in memory, and activated through use. These constructions are not only linguistic but cognitive: they involve attention, gesture, perception, and affect. The brain manages grammar through neural circuits that coordinate sensory input with symbolic output. Lakoff stresses that syntactic form is always bound to semantic structure, and the two co-evolve within the constraints of bodily experience. In this light, grammar becomes a living system of embodied concepts, not a formal calculus. Categories like subject and object, tense and aspect, or agent and patient, are not innate abstractions but recurrent patterns in how people experience the world and describe it. Syntax itself is shaped by what can be seen, felt, or imagined—and how it can be shared with others.

Acquisition of language

The evolution of verbal thinking did not occur through a sudden leap but through a gradual transition from instinctive, image-based cognition to structured language. In 'On the Origin of Verbal Thinking: Factors That Might Have Contributed to the Acquisition of Language by Man[23]' R. F. Berg argues that this transition reflects a deep psychological shift, not just a physiological or social one. Verbal thought, unlike its preverbal predecessor, enables abstraction, consistency, and shared understanding—but it emerges from a complex interplay of emotional expression, symbolic interpretation, and social behaviour. One of Berg's central insights is that much of what appears irrational in language—such as contradictory statements or emotional declarations—reveals essential cognitive functions. Language is not solely a tool for rational description; it is an expression of interior states, a vehicle for volition, and often, an approximation of experience. This multiplicity aligns with Karl Bühler's model of language's functions: expressive, directive, and descriptive. Most utterances blend these roles, illustrating that language, even in its logical form, carries residues of preverbal thought. Preverbal thinking, in this account, is rich in sensory images and emotional associations. It persists in dreams and fantasy, unconstrained by logical sequence or spatial-temporal limits. Before words, early humans thought in scenes, rhythms, and emotions. This kind of cognition is not inferior but operates under a different logic—one of resonance rather than reason. What language introduces is a capacity to label, isolate, and abstract those experiences, thereby transforming fluid impressions into stable categories. The origin of this transformation lies in early communal activities, especially those tied to ritual and collective rhythm. Berg emphasises how dance, chant, and synchronised movement may have linked physical expression with sound patterns,

[23] Berg, R. (1966) On the Origin of Verbal Thinking: Factors That Might Have Contributed to the Acquisition of Language by Man. Linguistics, Vol. 4(Issue 28), pp.5-45. https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1966.4.28.5

reinforcing memory and association. Over time, some vocalisations, once purely emotional or instinctual, acquired symbolic weight through repetition and communal reinforcement. This symbolic leap did not require conscious invention. On the contrary, language likely emerged through misinterpretations and accidents—instances where a sound was mistaken for a sign. Such moments, repeated across generations, allowed for a shared symbolic system to develop. Importantly, this system demanded delayed reaction, the ability to retain energy rather than acting on impulse—opening a space for reflection and abstraction. Verbal language developed through processes of simplification, differentiation, and socialisation. Instead of growing more complex, language became more efficient. Isolated sounds became standardised; patterns were broken down and recombined. The refinement of these units into usable linguistic systems was driven by social needs: to coordinate, to remember, to instruct, and to bind groups together. Yet with this power came cost. Language, Berg suggests, organises reality at the expense of immediacy. It allows humans to think in categories, but also distances them from raw perception. Words can name hunger but fail to convey its texture. They build worlds of thought, but those worlds may contradict lived feeling. In this tension lies the essence of verbal thinking: it makes thought possible, but not always true to experience.

Verbal thinking

From the moment an infant cries out into the world, language becomes the medium through which human life unfolds. That initial cry—marked by rhythm, tone, and urgency—is more than instinct; it is the first indication that language shapes how humans perceive and interact with their surroundings. According to Marilyn Buckley in 'The Development of Verbal Thinking and Its Implications for Teaching[24]', verbal thinking begins not in the classroom, but in the earliest sounds of infancy, long before formal education. Language acquisition in the first year is not passive. Children do not simply copy sounds—they decode the structure of speech, detect patterns, and attach meaning to unfamiliar noise. Regardless of which language surrounds them, they internalise its rhythms and cadences, guided by an innate cognitive sensitivity. This early capacity for linguistic pattern recognition, as Buckley suggests, points to an unconscious intelligence: a drive to construct meaning and revise understanding through constant interaction with language. In these early years, infants explore language through play. Babbling is not random noise—it is experimentation. Infants test phonemes, mimic intonations, and create combinations that hint at the words they will soon form. This linguistic play, described by researchers like Ruth Weir, reveals that language learning is a self-guided process, rooted in pleasure and curiosity. It is an act of invention rather than instruction. As children grow, their speech becomes both a social tool and a cognitive one. What Piaget saw as 'egocentric speech'—language spoken aloud seemingly without an audience—Vygotsky interpreted as the externalisation of thought. Children think by talking; their monologues are internal dialogues made public. Over time, this verbal scaffolding is internalised, becoming the silent structure of conscious thought. The implications for teaching are significant. If children learn and think through speech, then classrooms should foster—not stifle—verbal expression. Buckley argues that traditional classroom silence does not encourage deeper thinking but interrupts it. Teachers should instead design environments where students are invited to speak, question, and collaborate. Speaking should not merely report what is known; it should serve as a method of discovery. Effective teaching practices include encouraging students to talk through problems before writing, to summarise aloud what they have read, and to engage in collaborative discussion across all subjects. Language should permeate the curriculum—not

[24] Buckley, M. (n.d.) The Development of Verbal Thinking and Its Implications for Teaching. University of California, Berkeley.

only in literature but in science, mathematics, and history. When students use language to construct understanding, they are not just learning facts—they are learning to think. Verbal thinking is more than skill; it is the foundation of cognition. Learning to speak with clarity and listen with intent are not peripheral classroom activities—they are central to education itself. Language gives shape to thought, and when students are given the space to speak freely, they begin to make sense of the world in their own words.

Visual and verbal thinkers

Some people think in pictures, others in words. While this distinction seems intuitive, Kazuo Nishimura's magnetoencephalography (MEG) study[25] gives it a neural foundation, exploring how the brain behaves differently in visual thinkers and verbal thinkers during spontaneous thought. The research 'Brain Activities of Visual Thinkers and Verbal Thinkers: A MEG Study' shows that these cognitive preferences are not just habits of the mind but rooted in distinct patterns of brain activity. Participants in the study completed a short questionnaire assessing their ability to form mental images. Based on their answers, they were grouped as strong visualisers (those who think in images) and weak visualisers (those who think in language). Then, while performing two tasks—one involving visual imagery and another requiring verbal memory—MEG data was collected to examine activity in two key brain areas: the primary visual cortex (BA 17) and Broca's area (BA 44), known for its role in language processing. The results were striking. Strong visualisers consistently showed greater activation in the primary visual cortex, particularly during the visual imagery task. This finding aligns with earlier studies that found visual mental imagery stimulates the same brain regions as actual visual perception. For those who could easily picture a scene in their mind, the visual cortex was doing much of the cognitive lifting. In contrast, weak visualizers—those who rely more on verbal strategies—displayed significantly more activity in Broca's area, even during tasks involving mental imagery. This suggests that verbal thinkers tend to translate experiences and tasks into internal narratives, engaging the linguistic centres of the brain even when asked to perform something as visual as forming a mental picture. The study focused specifically on beta-band oscillations around 25 Hz, a frequency range associated with focused cognitive activity. In visual thinkers, this rhythmic brain activity was concentrated in the visual cortex. In verbal thinkers, the rhythm shifted toward Broca's area. These patterns point to a deeper, perhaps structural, difference in how individuals process information—not simply in their conscious preferences but in the architecture of their thought. This neural divide raises questions about learning, creativity, and even communication. If someone's brain tends toward imagery while another's leans into language, their approaches to solving problems, retaining information, or expressing ideas might differ in fundamental ways. Educational strategies could benefit from acknowledging these variations. A diagram may speak more clearly to a visual thinker, while a verbal thinker might prefer step-by-step instructions or descriptive text. More broadly, these results suggest that mental style is not merely a personal quirk but a neurological trait. Recognising that visual and verbal thinking have different neural signatures offers a way to understand—and possibly tailor—how people learn, remember, and imagine.

[25] Nishimura, K., Aoki, T., Inagawa, M., Tobinaga, Y. and Iwaki, S. (2015). Brain activities of visual thinkers and verbal thinkers: A MEG study. Neuroscience Letters, 594, pp.155–160. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neulet.2015.03.043.

2.2. Inner speech

(The voices within: Silent dialogues of the Self)

'The self is a dialogical process, constantly talking to itself in a world of voices'.

— Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics

Visual thinking

In 'Visual Thinking[26]', Rudolf Arnheim challenges the deeply rooted belief in Western philosophy that perception and reasoning are distinct and hierarchical processes. The common assumption holds that reasoning is an abstract, verbal activity, while perception belongs to the realm of passive, sensory experience. Arnheim refutes this dualism by asserting that perception itself is a form of thinking. The act of seeing is not merely registering stimuli but involves active mental operations—selecting, organising, and interpreting—that are essential to understanding the world. Thought does not begin where perception ends; it is already at work within it. Arnheim's critique traces the history of this split, starting with philosophers like Plato, who distrusted sensory perception and privileged reason as the path to truth. While Plato acknowledged in myths like the cave allegory that vision could lead toward knowledge, he still placed the senses under the suspicion of illusion. This distrust shaped educational systems that elevate verbal and numerical reasoning above the arts. Language and logic became the currency of intelligence, while visual and tactile ways of knowing were dismissed as primitive or emotional. However, as Arnheim shows, this view fails to account for how humans think. Even abstract reasoning, he argues, relies on imagery. One does not reason in pure symbols or formulas but in concrete mental pictures. Whether solving a physics problem or interpreting a painting, the mind engages spatial, structural, and visual patterns. These patterns are not decorative—they are the very architecture of thought. The arts, long marginalised as expressive or recreational, are revealed as rigorous disciplines of structured thinking. Drawing, designing, and composing are cognitive acts on par with composing arguments or solving equations. This emphasis on perception as cognition extends to Arnheim's view of language. While verbal language is often seen as the vessel of thought, he argues it is merely one of many. Words have sensory qualities—sounds, rhythms, visual shapes—but these qualities are structurally weak compared to visual forms. A melody or a geometric diagram contains more relational information than a sentence of equal length. Grammar, though abstractly systematic, offers few perceptual cues to help the mind grasp relationships among ideas. Language succeeds, not because of its sensory richness, but because it links concepts to stable, repeatable signs. Arnheim emphasises that language is not the origin of thought but a tool that helps stabilise and share ideas. Its power lies in its capacity to fix boundaries and give shape to fluid perceptions. Words carve distinctions—between cat and tiger, joy, and sorrow—and preserve them for reflection and communication. Yet even here, language leans on visual metaphor. The term 'insight', for instance, connects the act of seeing with understanding. Such linguistic habits reveal that abstract concepts are grounded in perceptual experience. Ultimately, 'Visual Thinking' urges a reintegration of the senses into intellectual life. It argues that the sharp separation between logic and imagery has impoverished both education and cognition. By restoring visual perception to its rightful place as a mode of thinking, Arnheim shows that reason does not float above the senses—it is rooted in them.

[26] Arnheim, R. (1969) Visual Thinking, University of California Press.

Intrapersonal communication

Intrapersonal communication is the quiet, ongoing conversation people have with themselves—a form of internal dialogue that shapes thoughts, emotions, and actions. Unlike speaking with others, this communication stays within the boundaries of the individual, taking the form of mental rehearsal, reflection, self-instruction, or emotional processing. It occurs continuously and often unconsciously, guiding decision-making, regulating emotions, and constructing self-understanding. This process can be verbal, as when one silently tells oneself, 'Stay calm', or non-verbal, like mentally visualising a future event or reliving a memory. At times, it is a monologue—an inner coach or critic offering feedback. At others, it feels more like a dialogue, with different perspectives or parts of the self debating, questioning, or negotiating. These 'voices' might represent rational and emotional aspects of the self, past and future selves, or social roles internalised over time. Intrapersonal communication also manifests in externalised forms, like journaling, writing reminders, or talking aloud when alone. Though outwardly expressed, these actions still serve the internal purpose of organising thought, clarifying intentions, or resolving inner tension. It plays a role not only in solitude but also in social situations—helping people prepare for interaction, plan responses, or regulate behaviour in real time. Psychologically, intrapersonal communication is tied to self-concept and emotional health. How people talk to themselves reflects and shapes how they see themselves. Encouraging self-talk can promote confidence and resilience; self-critical or distorted internal messages, on the other hand, are often linked to anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Cognitive-behavioural therapy frequently targets this inner dialogue, helping individuals identify and change negative patterns. Cognitively, it underpins reasoning and problem-solving. When faced with choices, people evaluate possibilities internally, test ideas, simulate outcomes, and decide paths forward—all through intrapersonal communication. In education, it supports learning through mental rehearsal, self-testing, and note-taking. In the workplace, it aids in self-monitoring, planning, and performance review. Creatively, it fuels imagination, introspection, and self-expression. Writers, artists, and thinkers often engage deeply with their own thoughts before any public expression emerges. Through inner reflection, people explore identity, values, and meaning, adjusting their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Despite its importance, intrapersonal communication resists easy observation. It unfolds silently, invisible to others, and researchers often rely on introspection or self-report to study it. Some argue it is not truly communication since it lacks an external receiver. But others see the self as both speaker and listener—a dynamic internal system that processes and responds, even if silently. Intrapersonal communication bridges thought and behaviour, emotion, and reason. It is the backstage of speech, the inner scaffolding of decision and desire. Whether whispered as encouragement, rehearsed as future dialogue, or held silently as reflection, this self-communication shapes how people live, feel, and relate to others.

Embodied cognition

Embodied cognition is the idea that the mind is not separate from the body but deeply intertwined with it. Rather than viewing thought as something that happens solely inside the head, this perspective holds that the body and its interactions with the world shape how people perceive, remember, reason, and act. The body, in this sense, is not just a vessel for the brain but an active participant in the process of thinking. This view challenges the long-standing philosophical divide between mind and body—what is often called Cartesian dualism. Instead of imagining thought as abstract computation or symbol manipulation detached from physicality, embodied cognition emphasises that human intelligence emerges from sensorimotor experiences. How a person moves, what they touch, and where they are all feed into how they think. The roots of this idea go back to early thinkers who connected language,

culture, and bodily experience. In the 20th century, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty described perception as something grounded in lived, bodily experience—not as a passive reception of stimuli, but as active engagement with the world. In recent decades, this approach has gained momentum across cognitive science, supported by studies in neuroscience, psychology, and even robotics. Modern research offers compelling evidence for the role of the body in shaping thought. In language, for example, people understand phrases like 'grasping an idea' partly through the motor regions of the brain associated with grasping. Reading action-related words triggers subtle activations in the same areas used to perform those actions. Memory and perception also depend on bodily states—re-enacting physical movements can trigger memories more vividly, and posture can affect how people interpret emotional experiences. Behavioural experiments support these insights. Children learning math often understand concepts better when using their hands. Mimicking gestures during conversation improves recall. In social settings, subtle coordination of body movements—mirroring posture or rhythm—can enhance empathy and bonding. Emotions, too, are shaped by the body: smiling can make people feel happier, while slouching might deepen feelings of fatigue or sadness. Beyond humans, embodied cognition has inspired work in robotics and artificial intelligence. Robots that navigate the world by physically interacting with it—rather than relying on abstract models alone—demonstrate more adaptive and intelligent behaviours. These machines, like those developed by Boston Dynamics, show how cognition can emerge from feedback between sensors, limbs, and environment. Still, the theory faces criticism. Its broadness makes it hard to define precisely, and some studies—especially those on body posture and emotion—have struggled to replicate. Yet, even with these limitations, embodied cognition remains a powerful framework. It invites a rethinking of the mind as something fundamentally grounded in the lived, physical world. Rather than separating body from thought, it suggests they are co-constructed. The way one stands, moves, or breathes becomes part of how one reasons, learns, and understands. In this view, to think is also to feel, to move, and to be present in a world that responds.

Schema in philosophy

In Kant’s critical philosophy, the notion of 'schema' marks a crucial point of contact between abstract thought and sensory experience. A schema is not an image or a concrete example, but a rule—a temporal pattern—that allows a pure concept of the understanding, such as causality or substance, to be meaningfully applied to the world as it appears. Without schemata, Kant argues, categories would be empty, and intuitions blind; thought and perception would fail to meet. Kant’s problem is how to explain the application of a priori concepts—universal and necessary structures of thought—to the ever-changing, empirical flow of sense impressions. Categories like unity, causality, or necessity are not derived from experience, yet they organise it. The solution, presented in the chapter on *Schematism* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is that the imagination provides a mediating function. It does this not by generating mental pictures but by producing temporal rules—schemata—that match the form of experience to the demands of conceptual understanding. Each category has its own schema. For example, the schema of causality is the rule that one event follows another in time in a lawful sequence. The schema of quantity involves successive addition in time—number as a temporal construction. These schemata are not static structures but active procedures that guide the mind in synthesising sensory data under the guidance of pure concepts. They are time-bound, because time, for Kant, is the form of inner sense and the condition under which all appearances unfold. This emphasis on time marks a departure from earlier rationalist models, which often sought certainty in timeless truths. Kant argues instead that our experience is always temporal, and the mind must bring concepts into play through temporal structuring.

Even mathematical concepts, like a triangle, rely on rules for constructing figures in time, not on abstract definitions alone. Importantly, schemata apply only to phenomena—objects as they appear to us—not to things in themselves. The concept of freedom or of God, for instance, cannot be schematised because they do not appear in experience. Instead, they can be represented, but this symbolic mode lacks the direct procedural connection that schemata provide. Thus, Kant draws a sharp distinction between the use of reason in understanding appearances and its speculative use beyond the limits of experience. Schemata are therefore not just theoretical constructs but functional tools that make experience possible. They ensure that categories do not float above perception, disconnected and inapplicable. Instead, through the imagination's silent work, abstract thought is anchored in the flow of time, and meaning is generated in the rhythm between the universal and the particular. This insight into the middle ground—neither pure concept nor raw intuition—represents one of Kant's most original contributions, and one that continues to shape discussions of knowledge, perception, and the conditions of understanding.

Making sense of the unfamiliar

Absolutely nothing. The philosopher Immanuel Kant died before the platypus was even known to European science, and yet in Umberto Eco's 'Kant and the Platypus', the strange creature becomes a symbol for a deeper philosophical problem: how humans make sense of the unfamiliar through language and conceptual frameworks. The platypus—part mammal, part bird, part reptile—refuses easy categorisation. That very resistance makes it a fitting metaphor for Eco's inquiry into cognition, naming, and interpretation. Eco's book is not a systematic treatise, but rather a series of philosophical essays that orbit the same set of problems: how people identify, classify, and make meaning out of things in the world. Drawing on his earlier work in 'A Theory of Semiotics', Eco revisits questions about reference, perception, and interpretation—this time with more attention to cognitive science, pragmatism, and the limits of linguistic meaning. The book is part philosophical reflection, part intellectual autobiography. It also includes playful detours—into Borges's fictional taxonomies, Marco Polo's unicorns, and even the way cats, dogs, and chairs are conceptualised across languages and cultures. The platypus becomes the ultimate test case. When early naturalists encountered the animal, it did not fit any known category. Was it a mammal, a bird, a reptile? The temptation was to label it by analogy—'water mole', 'duck-billed' something—or to reject it as a hoax. For Eco, this response illustrates the cognitive challenge of encountering the truly novel: the mind instinctively reaches for old frameworks but must stretch or revise them when they no longer fit. Eco engages both Kant and Charles Peirce to think through this problem. Kant's notion of schemata—the mental templates that mediate between sensory experience and abstract categories—provides one model. But Kant struggled to explain how these schemata are generated, especially when faced with something utterly unfamiliar. Peirce, in contrast, emphasised abduction, or hypothesis generation. When you see something new, like the platypus, you make a best guess using fragments of previous knowledge. These guesses may be wrong or provisional, but they are essential to the ongoing process of understanding. The essays reflect Eco's evolving philosophical stance, what he calls 'contractual realism'. He rejects the idea that reality is purely a mental construction, but also resists the naive belief that words directly capture the world. Instead, meaning is a negotiation—between cultural codes, sensory input, and the resistance of things themselves. The platypus is real, and its strangeness forces humans to adjust their categories to comprehend it. In Eco's view, this process is both cognitive and narrative. The essays frequently return to the limitations of formal systems and the open-endedness of interpretation. Eco insists that even the most technical systems of reference are embedded in culture, history, and negotiation. Language does not merely reflect reality—it

participates in shaping how reality is understood. This view leads him to what he terms contractual realism: a pragmatic stance that respects both the resistance of reality and the flexibility of human interpretation. 'Kant and the Platypus' is a rich, self-reflexive, and often playful work. It offers no easy answers but instead provides tools for thinking about how humans name, categorise, and understand the world—and how they stumble, improvise, and revise along the way. The platypus, awkward and wonderful, remains the book's emblem of cognition's encounter with the unexpected. To understand anything new, people tell stories—about what it is, what it resembles, where it fits. Interpretation, then, is not simply about truth or reference; it is also about making reality liveable and speakable. And so, even though Kant never saw a platypus, the platypus, in Eco's words, might need to learn about Kant just to find its place in human understanding.

Referring as contract

In one of the central essays of 'Kant and the Platypus', Umberto Eco proposes that referring—like meaning—is not simply a mechanical operation, but a social act governed by a kind of implicit contract between speakers and listeners. The act of reference, often taken for granted in everyday speech, is in fact a dynamic process that relies on shared conventions, contextual negotiation, and trust. Rather than if names and words rigidly point to stable entities, Eco draws attention to the fluidity and contingency involved in naming and pointing. Referring, Eco argues, is the act of 'designation', of identifying a specific entity at a particular moment in space and time. This distinguishes it from general descriptions or class-based attributions. For example, 'platypuses lay eggs' is a universal claim about a category, while 'that platypus is sleeping' refers to a particular creature, situated and unique. To perform such acts, language alone is insufficient: speakers must rely on shared background knowledge, cultural context, and mutual assumptions. Reference is possible not because words inherently refer, but because interlocutors agree—tacitly—on what is being referred to. This agreement does not imply certainty. Eco reminds readers that reference often involves 'haecceity', the medieval notion of the unrepeatable uniqueness of individuals. Even when two objects appear identical, they can be distinguished by their specific placement in time and space. One refers to this page, not just any. Such acts of pointing are bound to lived experience. But even here, success depends on community norms: one cannot refer to Napoleon or Aix-la-Chapelle meaningfully unless others are able to recognise the referent through shared knowledge or clarification. Eco explores examples where reference becomes a matter of 'negotiation'. Consider Montezuma, informed about horses before ever seeing one. His messengers described horses in terms familiar to their culture, allowing Montezuma to later identify them through analogy. The initial act of naming relied not on a rigid designation but on a provisional interpretive agreement—a 'contractual framework'—which enabled the referent to take form before direct experience. This logic extends to 'fictional entities'. In a comedic sketch, a character invents a creature called a 'sarkiapone', prompting his friend to infer its traits through dialogue. The animal is entirely fictitious, yet the process of referring functions: shared expectations, trust, and playful interaction allow a referent to be imagined and recognised. Even in the absence of real-world grounding, the reference is successful within the parameters of the shared linguistic contract. Eco ultimately questions rigid designator theory by suggesting that reference depends not on metaphysical anchoring but on 'community consensus'. People trust dictionaries, experts, or social usage to interpret what names like 'water' or 'Einstein' mean. When consensus shifts—as with scientific discoveries or cultural reinterpretations—the meaning of reference adjusts accordingly. Language is not static; reference is pragmatic. Thus, reference operates not by divine fiat or metaphysical link, but through interpersonal negotiation, flexible alignment, and

evolving community standards. It is, in essence, a contract of understanding—provisional, fallible, and deeply human.

Private speech

Private speech—the quiet murmurings of children as they talk to themselves during play or problem-solving—was once dismissed as cognitive noise. But as Lawrence Kohlberg and colleagues show in 'Private Speech: Four Studies and a Review of Theories[27]', it offers a window into the unfolding mind. Their research draws from theories by Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, and Flavell, blending experimental findings with philosophical insights to reframe how this solitary speech shapes thought and development. Piaget considered private speech a sign of egocentrism. Children, he believed, had not yet grasped that others do not share their thoughts. Talking aloud in the presence of others without expecting a response seemed, to him, like a failure to understand social boundaries. According to this view, the child grows out of private speech as they become more socially attuned—leaving behind what Piaget saw as immature and solitary verbal habits. Vygotsky, however, saw it differently. He argued that private speech is not a social failure but a cognitive tool. Children speak to themselves not because they cannot relate to others, but because they are trying to guide their own thinking. It is not the absence of communication but its internalisation. In his view, private speech does not disappear with age—it becomes silent, woven into the structure of thought. Mead added a broader perspective, suggesting that selfhood emerges from social interaction. When a child speaks privately, they are rehearsing roles, internalising the voices of others. Through language, they shape the self. The shift from outward speech to inner thought, then, mirrors the transition from external dialogue to internal consciousness. Flavell contributed by showing that private speech has multiple functions and forms. His observations revealed that it serves not just cognitive purposes but emotional and social ones too. From naming toys to narrating tasks, children use speech to regulate their behaviour, soothe anxiety, and explore ideas. The studies conducted by Kohlberg and his team affirmed that private speech peaks between ages four and six, then gradually recedes as it becomes internalised. But rather than viewing this as a decline, they traced its transformation through seven stages—from playful word repetition to inaudible muttering, and finally into fully silent, inner speech. This gradual internalisation supports Vygotsky's claim that thinking is 'the mind talking to itself'. Crucially, the studies also showed that mental age and task difficulty—not sex, nationality, or even chronological age—best predict the occurrence of private speech. In other words, children speak to themselves more when a task is hard and their mind is actively working through it. Speech, in these cases, becomes a tool for thought, not just a byproduct. Far from being an irrelevant habit, private speech reveals how language and thinking merge. It is a rehearsal space for thought, a bridge between speaking to others and speaking to oneself. In that quiet dialogue, the child becomes a thinker.

Language overrated

Language often receives more credit than it deserves as the central engine of thought. In 'Visual Thinking', Rudolf Arnheim challenges this linguistic bias, arguing that language plays a secondary, stabilising role in cognition. While it does not merely serve as a label for finished thoughts, its main function is to secure and preserve ideas already formed through perceptual experience. This conservative function affects cognition, but the claim that language alone shapes how people think—linguistic determinism—is overly simplistic and unproven. The

[27] Kohlberg, L., Yaeger, J., & Hjertholm, E. (n.d.) Private Speech: Four Studies and a Review of Theories. University of Chicago.

belief that each language forms a self-contained worldview, famously put forward by Wilhelm von Humboldt, rests on introspective idealism. It assumes that the mind generates the world it perceives and that language binds perception in fixed categories. But this overlooks the more fundamental processes by which concepts arise. Ideas do not originate from words but from interaction with the environment. Language may draw a boundary around its users, but that circle is porous and can be crossed through perception, comparison, and imagination. Empirical cases often cited in support of linguistic determinism collapse under scrutiny. The Wintun language, for example, lacks singular-plural distinctions, yet this does not mean its speakers lack awareness of individuality. Similarly, the Trobriand Islanders' allegedly nonlinear perception of time may stem more from cultural practices than from syntax. Language reflects habits of mind but does not dictate them. Grammatical gender is another case in point. The gendering of nouns in languages like German does not lead speakers to view objects through gendered lenses. A table is not imbued with masculinity. The speakers of gender-neutral languages do not lack sensitivity to social distinctions. Linguistic features vary widely without necessarily producing cognitive differences. Arnheim argues that language supports cognition, but it does not drive it. Words function as auxiliary signs for perceptual structures. They provide fixed labels, which can promote conceptual rigidity and even mislead. A word like 'empty', for instance, may imply both harmlessness and danger—depending on context. Misinterpretation arises not from the word itself, but from dominant perceptual associations that language may reinforce rather than create. Concepts can and do exist without corresponding words. As James Deese has shown, there are countless categories for which English has no terms—like 'animals with legs' or 'surfaces of a room'. The absence of vocabulary does not imply a lack of understanding. Rather, it reflects the selective focus of language and culture. Ultimately, words offer a useful but limited tool for organising thought. They are not the birthplace of cognition but its echo—a scaffolding that supports mental processes shaped more profoundly by perception. Language's real power lies not in generating thought but in preserving, communicating, and refining what the mind first experiences through seeing, touching, and moving through the world.

Thinking without words

Many animals and human infants appear to think, even though they lack language. In 'Thinking Without Words[28]', José Luis Bermúdez develops a framework for understanding this kind of cognition, challenging the assumption that linguistic ability is a prerequisite for genuine thought. By drawing a distinction between associative behaviour and psychologically explainable action, he argues that some creatures act in ways best understood through beliefs, desires, and perceptions—not just reflexes or conditioned responses. These behaviours reveal a flexible intelligence, suggesting that non-linguistic beings can be true thinkers, albeit in a different register from humans with language. The heart of Bermúdez's argument lies in the difference between propositional and non-propositional thought. Propositional thought involves beliefs or desires about things—such as wanting the food that is under the log or believing the nest is safe. This kind of thinking depends on abstract concepts and generalisations that go beyond what is immediately present. In contrast, non-propositional thought operates within the bounds of immediate perception and is often shaped by spatial and sensory cues. Animals and infants may not formulate ideas in sentence-like structures, but they still organise their experience and behaviour around goals and interpretations of their environment. This raises a critical question: what can a creature think without language? Bermúdez makes it clear that

[28] Bermúdez, J.L. (2011) Thinking Without Words: An Overview for Animal Ethics. Washington University in St. Louis.

while language expands the possibilities of thought, it is not the sole basis for it. Higher-order thought—such as reflecting on one's own beliefs or understanding the thoughts of others—might require language because it involves an intentional ascent: thinking about thinking. But many forms of reasoning and behaviour occur without this recursive depth. An animal avoiding a trap or choosing the quickest path to food is not engaging in logical inference but is displaying what Bermúdez calls 'proto-conditional reasoning'—a kind of practical understanding of cause and effect that does not require symbolic logic. These insights have significant ethical implications. Traditional views often tie moral status to rationality, assuming that without language or reflective self-awareness, animals are cognitively empty. But if animals exhibit forms of reasoning, memory, and planning—if they can act based on goals, expectations, and experiences—then moral consideration must extend to these capacities. Bermúdez cautions against drawing ethical lines too narrowly, pointing instead to a spectrum of cognition that includes meaningful thought without words. Non-linguistic cognition may not allow for philosophical speculation or storytelling, but it supports a wide range of intelligent behaviours. Understanding this kind of thought broadens our view of the mind and invites deeper respect for creatures whose inner lives remain largely silent but far from simple.

2.3. Righteous words

(Conviction and cognition: The language of moral thought)

'Moral reasoning is just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments people have already made'.

— Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind

'People cling to their conclusions, not because they are correct, but because they fit a larger story about who they are'.

— Dan Kahan, Cultural Cognition Project

Righteous mind

Jonathan Haidt's 'The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion' investigates a fundamental paradox: why people, who are generally motivated by morality, can so vehemently disagree on moral and political matters. The book opens with Rodney King's haunting plea—'Can we all get along?'—not as a nostalgic call for harmony, but as a question that continues to trouble societies fractured by ideological and cultural divisions. Haidt proposes that the key to this riddle lies not in facts or arguments, but in the architecture of the human moral mind. Haidt begins by challenging the Enlightenment ideal that people are rational moral agents who arrive at conclusions through reason. Instead, he argues that moral judgments arise primarily from intuition, not deliberate reasoning. Reason, in his model, serves more as a press secretary than a judge—its function is not to discover moral truths, but to defend the conclusions that intuition has already reached. This idea is encapsulated in his central metaphor: the mind is like a rider on an elephant, where the rider represents reason and the elephant represents intuition. The rider thinks he is in control, but mostly he just rationalises where the elephant goes. This insight helps explain why debates on moral and political topics are so intractable. If people's judgments are mostly intuitive, then presenting them with facts or logical counterpoints rarely changes their minds. Arguments, in this view, are tools for persuasion and defence, not vehicles for truth. This also accounts for the emotional intensity and perceived irrationality that often accompany moral disputes. A major part of Haidt's project

is to expand the reader's understanding of morality beyond the narrow focus on harm and fairness. Western liberal thought, he argues, tends to moralise these two dimensions while dismissing others—such as loyalty, authority, and sanctity—as outdated or irrational. Yet cross-cultural research reveals that these neglected moral 'taste buds' are central in many societies. Haidt introduces the idea that morality, like taste, is plural. Just as the human tongue has multiple receptors, human morality operates across several innate dimensions. Ignoring this diversity not only narrows understanding but also deepens polarisation. The second part of the book explores the evolutionary origins of morality. Haidt draws on the theory of multilevel selection to show how both individuals and groups have shaped human nature. While individuals are motivated by self-interest, groups that cooperate effectively tend to outcompete those that do not. Morality evolved, therefore, as a set of mechanisms that bind individuals into cohesive groups. But this same moral glue that promotes cooperation within groups also fosters division between them. This is Haidt's third key insight: morality both binds and blinds. It unites people around shared norms and identities while closing them off to alternative viewpoints. This groupish tendency has deep evolutionary roots. Unlike other primates, humans exhibit an extraordinary capacity for shared intentionality—the ability to collaborate on common goals by forming shared mental representations. This capacity gave rise to everything from hunting parties to religious rituals, enabling the formation of large-scale societies. Over time, a process of gene-culture coevolution reinforced these behaviours. Practices that promoted group cohesion—such as norms of purity, taboos, and loyalty—became biologically advantageous, selecting for individuals more attuned to their group's moral code. The final chapters of the book offer a hopeful, if cautious, way forward. Haidt does not call for a moral relativism that dismisses disagreement as meaningless. Instead, he encourages people to recognise the legitimacy of different moral frameworks. Moral disagreement, he suggests, becomes less toxic when people understand that others are not evil or stupid, but responding to different moral intuitions. This perspective invites humility, curiosity, and the possibility of more productive dialogue. Morality cannot be reduced to a single principle. Haidt's pluralistic view resists the tendency to elevate one dimension—such as care or fairness—above all others. The full spectrum of human moral psychology must be considered. Understanding that people may be equally righteous in radically different ways does not eliminate conflict, but it can temper the self-righteousness that so often accompanies it. If people are, as Haidt puts it, '90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee', then the challenge is to make peace with both natures. The chimp fights for individual status and reward; the bee sacrifices for the hive. Only by acknowledging both can societies hope to balance liberty with cohesion, reason with loyalty, and individual rights with shared values.

Hive switch

In his account of basic training during World War II, historian William McNeill described the strange, euphoric sensation that came from marching in synchrony with his fellow soldiers. It was, he later wrote, an 'enlargement of the self', a state in which individuality seemed to dissolve into the rhythm of the group. The experience was not intellectual but bodily—muscular, collective, and deeply emotional. McNeill called this phenomenon 'muscular bonding' and proposed it as a foundation for human cooperation, especially in situations like war where self-interest must give way to the unity of the group. Jonathan Haidt builds on this idea in 'The Righteous Mind', suggesting that human beings are not merely self-interested individuals but also have a latent capacity to become 'groupish'. He calls this transformative capacity 'the hive switch'—a biological and psychological adaptation that allows people to shift from self-focused to group-focused modes of being. While most animals live entirely within the logic of the individual, humans are capable of moments in which they act, feel, and think as

part of a larger whole. This switch is not always on, but it can be activated under certain conditions, enabling collective joy, shared identity, and even sacrifice for others. The hive switch appears in ancient rituals and modern subcultures alike. It is present in synchronised dance, in religious ceremony, in military drill, and in ecstatic communal gatherings. The anthropologist Emile Durkheim coined the term 'collective effervescence' to describe the heightened emotional state that emerges during these shared experiences—an energy that lifts individuals out of their private lives and into the sacred life of the group. The sensation is not merely metaphorical. It is tied to neurobiological changes—especially the release of oxytocin, the so-called 'bonding hormone', and the activity of mirror neurons that allow people to empathise and imitate one another's actions and emotions. Importantly, Haidt emphasises that the hive switch is not universally good. It promotes altruism, solidarity, and belonging—but only within the group. The same mechanisms that bind people together can also intensify division, hostility, and cruelty toward outsiders. Religion, for instance, can be both a source of moral community and a tool of exclusion and violence. The hive switch does not discriminate; it merely intensifies the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Modern secular societies have largely lost touch with the kinds of rituals and symbols that activate the hive switch. Yet they still produce functional equivalents. Haidt describes the spectacle of American college football as a secular ritual with unmistakably religious features: symbolic dress, coordinated movement, rhythmic chants, collective joy, and sorrow. Fans become participants in a moral community, one that bonds them together not through doctrine but through synchronised attention and shared emotion. The hive switch flips when individuals join in singing a fight song or mourning a lost game—not for personal glory, but for the team, for something larger than themselves. What the hive switch shows is that humans crave belonging not only as a social convenience but as a moral and spiritual necessity. It explains why people find profound meaning in shared experiences, from music festivals to religious revivals to national parades. The group offers not just identity but transcendence. One becomes more than oneself, even if briefly. This phenomenon may have evolved as a mechanism of survival, giving an edge to groups that could suppress selfishness and act in unity. But it has also become a source of aesthetic, emotional, and moral richness. In times of social fragmentation, understanding the hive switch is essential. It shows that individualism, while vital, is only part of the human story. Without spaces to feel absorbed into something larger, people grow anxious, isolated, and cynical. The revival of secular rituals—public celebrations, civic ceremonies, collective art—could help reactivate this dormant human faculty. These rituals need not imitate religion in belief, but they must match it in intensity, structure, and communal purpose. The hive switch, then, is not a flaw in human psychology but one of its most sublime capacities. Properly understood, it offers a path toward deeper cohesion without the need for dogma. It reminds people that the fullness of human life is not achieved in isolation but in the synchrony of movement, feeling, and meaning with others. The question is does the hive switch still works in the mass society of megacities?

Moral politics

The divide between conservatives and liberals in American politics cannot be explained merely through policy disagreements or rational argument. According to George Lakoff in 'Moral Politics[29]', the root of this polarisation lies in two conflicting moral worldviews that structure how people understand right and wrong. These worldviews shape political beliefs at a deep, mostly unconscious level. People do not simply choose policies based on facts; rather, they evaluate those facts through moral metaphors grounded in life experience and cultural narratives. Over time, these metaphors solidify into neural patterns, forming distinct moral

[29] Lakoff, G. (2016) Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think, University of Chicago Press.

systems that make opposing views seem not just incorrect, but immoral. Lakoff argues that morality in politics is not relative or whimsical, but structured by underlying models of the family. Conservatives tend to adopt what he calls the 'Strict Father' model, where moral behaviour is equated with discipline, authority, and self-reliance. In this framework, the world is dangerous and competitive, and the role of the father—or government—is to instruct children right from wrong through punishment and reward. Help should only go to those who have earned it; dependency is seen as moral failure. In contrast, liberals tend to embrace a 'Nurturant Parent' model, grounded in empathy, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Here, the goal is to support others so they can flourish, and care for the vulnerable is a moral imperative, not a weakness. These competing models inform everything from economic policy to healthcare, immigration, environmental protection, and criminal justice. For example, progressive support for social programs is not based on an abstract belief in big government, but on a moral commitment to care and fairness. Conservative resistance, on the other hand, stems from a belief that such programs erode personal responsibility and moral order. When viewed through this lens, many political arguments are not truly about policy efficiency or evidence, but about deeply held beliefs about what kind of person one should be and what kind of society is morally good. One of Lakoff's most provocative claims is that facts themselves are not enough to change people's minds. Most thought—around 98%—is unconscious, and moral worldviews shape how people perceive and interpret information. When facts clash with one's worldview, they are often ignored, distorted, or dismissed. This helps explain why so many people hold views that seem resistant to empirical evidence, such as denying climate change or dismissing structural inequality. But this is not limited to conservatives; liberals, too, often ignore findings from cognitive science, if presenting data and logic should persuade rational people. This belief fails to account for the cognitive mechanisms by which meaning is formed. Because moral worldviews are metaphorically structured, framing is crucial. If you frame taxation as a form of theft, it becomes immoral to raise taxes. If you frame it as a way of paying dues to a shared community, then it becomes an act of civic responsibility. These metaphors are not optional rhetoric—they are the substance of thought itself. Therefore, political debate is not just about arguments, but about activating the right metaphors and conceptual frames in people's minds. Lakoff's work urges a rethinking of public discourse. To bridge ideological divides, one must understand and respect the moral logic of others—even if it seems alien. Only then can political dialogue move beyond accusation and manipulation toward genuine understanding.

Truth that fits

The way people understand truth and morality is often shaped more by metaphor and experience than by strict logic or formal definitions. In 'Moral Politics', George Lakoff challenges the traditional view of truth as something absolute, objective, and universally accessible. He argues that truth is always relative to conceptual systems—and those systems are largely metaphorical in nature. What counts as 'true' depends not on some neutral mirror of reality but on how a statement fits into the shared metaphors, categories, and experiences that people use to make sense of the world. Much of this conceptual scaffolding remains unconscious. People rarely notice the metaphors they live by, such as 'argument is war', 'time is money', or 'life is a journey'. These metaphors shape how experiences are categorised and understood, often making them feel like literal truths. But they are not neutral or universal. They reflect cultural patterns and physical interactions—what Lakoff calls 'experiential gestalts'. Even the language of emotion, morality, and politics is deeply metaphorical, yet people often mistake these projections for inherent truths. Philosophy, traditionally committed to objectivity, has often dismissed metaphor as literary decoration or imprecise expression. Yet Lakoff shows that metaphor is not merely about language—it is central to cognition. The belief in a single,

objective truth has long been a hallmark of Western thought, but Lakoff contends this is both unrealistic and damaging. It grants undue power to those who define dominant metaphors: politicians, religious leaders, advertisers, and media. When a society holds objectivism as a sacred ideal, whoever controls the language effectively controls the truth. Truth matters not because it mirrors some absolute reality, but because it helps people survive, function, and relate. Knowing where to find food, how to navigate relationships, or when to trust others depends on accepted truths—practical understandings grounded in lived experience. These understandings are built through projection and categorisation. People impose boundaries, directions, and features onto the world—like seeing a forest clearing as a container or giving a rock a 'front' and 'back'. These projections do not exist in nature; they arise from human perspective and purpose. Categories also play a crucial role in truth. For example, whether something is called a 'chair' depends on context—what serves as a chair at a picnic may not be suitable for a formal dinner. Truth is contingent on how categories align with context, function, and intention. Saying someone is 'a great cellist' may obscure other equally true aspects of that person's identity. The truth of a statement is never just about correspondence—it is about fit, coherence, and usefulness within a particular frame. Even metaphorical statements can be true in this framework. Saying 'inflation has gone up' involves metaphors like 'more is up' and 'inflation is a substance'. Such projections are not arbitrary; they structure understanding in meaningful, culturally coherent ways. Likewise, calling an argument a 'battle' makes sense within a metaphor that sees persuasion as conflict. This experientialist account of truth combines several elements: correspondence (statements must fit situations), coherence (they must align with a conceptual framework), pragmatism (they must work in lived experience), and realism (they are constrained by cultural and physical reality). But this realism is not absolute—it is shaped by how people interact with the world. Objectivity, then, becomes a social ideal rather than a metaphysical fact. Lakoff's model offers a third way between objectivism and radical subjectivism. It recognises that while truth is not fixed or absolute, it is not arbitrary either. People do not invent reality at will, but they do interpret it through metaphorical structures grounded in bodily and cultural experience. By understanding this, one can begin to see political and moral conflicts not as irrational disagreements but as clashes between incompatible metaphorical systems—each with its own sense of what is 'true'.

Philosophy in the flesh

Traditional philosophy has long assumed that human reason is disembodied, conscious, and literal—a pristine instrument for discovering universal truths. But findings from cognitive science fundamentally challenge this view. In 'Philosophy in the Flesh[30]' Geroge Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the mind is not a detached rational processor but an embodied, largely unconscious, metaphorical system. This radical revision of how humans think undermines the foundations of much Western philosophy and calls for a new framework that reflects how minds work. First, reason is not abstract or universal—it is bodily. What people call rational thought emerges from physical processes: neural structures shaped by perception, motor skills, and evolutionary pressures. The very idea that concepts like time, self, and morality are grasped through logical deduction or introspection collapses under evidence showing how deeply these ideas are entangled with sensory experience. Even mathematical reasoning is grounded in bodily metaphors, such as 'moving forward in time' or 'building' an argument. Thought is not outside the body; it is the body interpreting itself through experience. Second, most thought is unconscious—not in the Freudian sense of repression but in the sense that most of the mental

[30] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. New York: Basic Books.

activity occurs below awareness. People do not consciously decide how to interpret grammar, decode facial expressions, or understand metaphors; these are managed by automatic cognitive systems. One does not consciously process that 'more is up' (as in 'prices are rising') or that 'love is a journey' (as in 'our relationship has hit a dead end')—these mappings emerge from embodied experiences. As a result, much of what seems like 'intuitive truth' is instead the result of ingrained conceptual metaphors rooted in physical interaction. Third, abstract thought is not literal or purely logical—it is metaphorical. This is perhaps the most disruptive insight. The idea that humans reason through formal logic or deductive chains is an illusion. Instead, people use metaphors derived from bodily experience to structure abstract domains. For instance, arguments are treated as war ('he attacked my point'), and time is seen as money ('you're wasting my time'). These metaphors are not just linguistic flourishes; they are how concepts are understood at a cognitive level. Every moral system, political ideology, or philosophical framework draws on such unconscious metaphoric scaffolding, meaning that claims to neutrality or universality are illusory. These three findings—embodiment, unconscious thought, and metaphorical reasoning—reshape how philosophy must be practiced. They reveal that classic conceptions of the self, morality, or mind found in Descartes, Kant, or utilitarianism are not wrong in every detail but founded on mistaken assumptions about how thinking works. For example, the rational autonomous subject of Enlightenment philosophy assumes a disembodied agent making conscious, logical decisions. But this figure is a fiction; in reality, cognition is shaped by biases, metaphors, and bodily experiences that vary by culture and individual history. A new approach to philosophy must begin not with a priori speculation but with an empirical understanding of cognition. Philosophers must integrate knowledge from neuroscience, linguistics, and psychology to ground their inquiries in how people experience and conceptualise the world. Concepts like causality, free will, and truth can no longer be defined solely through logic or linguistic analysis—they must be re-examined through the lens of embodied cognition. This does not mean abandoning philosophy, but rethinking its method and purpose. Introspection and reasoned debate remain valuable, but only when used alongside an awareness of cognitive constraints. Philosophy in this new mode becomes a critical reflection on the limits of thought itself—not a search for transcendent truth but a mapping of how human minds construct and interpret meaning. In doing so, it becomes more humble, more interdisciplinary, and more attuned to lived experience. This vision of philosophy moves beyond speculation and abstraction. It asks people to see themselves not as pure intellects but as thinking bodies—creatures of metaphor, habit, and emotion. Only by embracing this vision can philosophy remain relevant in the age of brain science and cognitive inquiry. In sum, philosophical ideas are not cold abstractions. They are shaped by bodies, brains, and cultural narratives. Recognising this does not undermine philosophy but grounds it more deeply in human life. Thought itself is metaphorical, and philosophy, when reframed through cognitive science, becomes not less rigorous, but more human.

Embodied realism

'Philosophy in the Flesh[31]' follows the philosophical journey to understand reality and truth has evolved across centuries—from the intuitive realism of the Greeks to the representationalism of Descartes, and now toward an embodied view grounded in cognitive science. What unites these efforts is a fundamental human desire to know the world and one's place in it. But how humans think, and how that thinking is shaped by the body, has become central to redefining what is meant by 'truth' and 'realism'. Ancient Greek philosophers,

[31] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. New York: Basic Books.

particularly Aristotle, assumed a direct realism: the belief that perception connects humans to the world without mediation. The mind did not merely reflect reality; it grasped its essence. For them, knowledge was as real and present as the objects it apprehended. This perspective unified being and knowing—ontology and epistemology—and made no distinction between world and mind. That unity was shattered by Descartes. In asserting a divide between body and mind, he introduced representational realism: the idea that humans do not access the world directly but only through mental images or representations. Knowledge became a mirror, and truth a matter of internal symbols matching external reality. Over time, this model became more abstract, reducing thought to a system of symbol manipulation detached from bodily experience. It reached its extreme in twentieth-century computational theories of mind, where reason was envisioned as operating like software running on hardware—disembodied and purely formal. Cognitive science has decisively challenged this model. Embodied realism asserts that cognition arises not from a detached mental system, but from the biological, sensory, and interactive capacities of the human body. Concepts are not symbols floating in mental space, but tools for coping with and navigating a world to which people are physically and evolutionarily attuned. Truth, then, is not correspondence in the classical sense, but a form of embodied understanding—a fit between a human's conceptual structure and the world they inhabit. Embodied realism affirms that the world exists independently of any single observer and that people engage with it successfully, but it denies the assumption that there is one absolute way to understand or represent it. Knowledge is shaped by bodily interactions, cultural practices, and evolutionary history. The same reality can yield different truths depending on the context and purpose of inquiry. For instance, people see colours as properties of objects in everyday life, but science tells them they are outcomes of neural processing and environmental conditions. Embodied realism holds that both are valid forms of truth, grounded in different modes of understanding. Rather than reducing this position to relativism, embodied realism proposes a pragmatic realism. It accepts that humans bring interpretive frameworks to experience but insists those frameworks are constrained by bodily capacities and shared environments. Core categories—such as objects, spatial relationships, and causal interactions—are grounded in sensorimotor experience and shared across cultures. They enable communication, cooperation, and scientific progress, even as languages and metaphors evolve. Metaphors, in fact, are central to this cognitive account of truth. Far from being rhetorical devices, they are fundamental to thought itself. Humans understand love as a journey, time as money, and knowledge as vision not because of arbitrary poetic choices, but because such metaphors map abstract domains onto embodied experiences. Metaphors guide moral reasoning, scientific modeling, and even philosophical reflection. Without them, much of abstract human thought would be impossible. This shift has deep implications for philosophy. Classical debates about reality, knowledge, and truth have assumed a literalist model of reason: that truth is what fits the world, and thought should reflect it without distortion. But if reason is metaphorical and shaped by bodily experience, then philosophy must adapt. It can no longer rely solely on deduction or logic to reach conclusions about universals. It must become an empirical and interpretive practice—one that acknowledges the human form as both the ground and limit of understanding. Embodied realism thus opens a path toward metaphysical pluralism. There is not one truth, but multiple levels of truth arising from different perspectives—phenomenological, scientific, pragmatic. What unites them is not a disembodied mirror of reality, but a shared structure of embodied cognition. Rather than undermining objectivity, this view redefines it as coherence within humanly accessible frameworks, grounded in the interaction of body, mind, and world.

The purpose of memories

In Pascal Boyer's essay 'What Are Memories For?[32]' memory is not simply a recording device for the past. Rather than preserving a perfect archive of events, memory evolved as an adaptive tool that supports behaviour, identity, and social coordination. As Pascal Boyer explains, the function of memory is not to honour history but to inform action—guiding people through the present by referencing what has worked or failed in the past. Biologically, the brain retains experiences not for nostalgia, but because certain environments reward organisms for drawing on previous encounters. Yet the usefulness of remembering depends on context. In changing or unpredictable conditions, memory can mislead; in stable environments, it becomes a survival advantage. Humans, living in semi-stable and highly social environments, have developed a complex memory system to negotiate their surroundings—not just to recall but to imagine, predict, and adapt. Among memory's most puzzling features is episodic recall—the vivid re-experiencing of specific events. Unlike semantic or procedural memory, which supports general knowledge and skills, episodic memory allows people to mentally revisit unique situations. This 'mental time travel' enables simulations of future scenarios, giving memory a predictive function. It helps people plan, avoid past mistakes, and understand what others might do. The ability to imagine consequences, especially in social contexts, gives episodic memory its evolutionary edge. Beyond planning, memory plays a crucial role in personal identity. Autobiographical memory weaves individual episodes into coherent narratives. These life stories are neither fixed nor complete but actively shaped by one's goals and sense of self. Children do not form structured autobiographical memories until they can reflect on themselves as continuous beings. This self-awareness allows past events to be folded into a moral and emotional framework—a story of 'who I am' and 'how I came to be'. Importantly, these memories are not static snapshots. They are reconstructed every time they are recalled. The mind reshapes past experiences to suit present needs—emotional, social, or cognitive. This does not mean memory is always inaccurate, but that it is selective and interpretive. Such flexibility is a feature, not a flaw. It enables individuals to reinterpret events, sustain hope, revise regrets, and update self-understanding. Memory also has a collective dimension. Shared narratives—about history, ancestry, trauma, or triumph—bind individuals into cultural groups. Collective memory is not stored in a vault of facts, but maintained through repeated telling, ritual, and symbols. These shared memories often prioritise meaning over accuracy, shaping group identity and moral vision. While this can foster solidarity, it also creates tensions, as different groups remember the same events in conflicting ways. Ultimately, memory is a dynamic process: it supports imagination, consolidates identity, regulates emotions, and sustains culture. It is not a mirror of the past, but a cognitive resource for navigating the future. The question 'What are memories for?' cannot be answered by scanning neurons alone—it must consider how memory works in lives, relationships, and societies.

Tradition as truth

As Pascal Boyer notes in 'Tradition as Truth and Communication[33]', in anthropology, tradition has often been treated as a background assumption rather than a phenomenon deserving its own theoretical explanation. This oversight is striking, considering how central traditional practices, myths, and rituals have been to the discipline's founding ethnographies. The works of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard explored traditional societies at length, yet they rarely dissected the mechanisms of tradition itself. Despite anthropology's preoccupation with

[32] Boyer, P. (2009) 'What Are Memories For?', in Boyer, P. and Wertsch, J.V. (eds) Memory in Mind and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[33] Boyer, P. (1990) Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse, Cambridge University Press.

the traditional, it lacks a coherent theory of tradition as a cognitive and communicative process. One of the fundamental issues is that the term 'tradition' is often used too broadly. From kinship structures to belief systems, a vast array of institutions are grouped under this label. But resemblance to a few classic examples does not guarantee analytical clarity. Just as science would falter if it attempted to theorise about 'rectangular objects' or 'white animals', anthropology risks vagueness when it treats tradition as a catch-all category. To be useful, the concept must be narrowed: not everything inherited from the past qualifies. The focus should be on those social acts where truths are communicated and legitimated through ritual and repetition. Boyer's work turns away from written traditions to examine oral practices—those cultural transmissions enacted face-to-face through speech, gesture, and shared experience. Here, tradition is not something stored but something performed. It exists in the act of telling, citing, repeating, and reenacting. The emphasis is on interaction, on the moment when knowledge or belief is conveyed and received, with reference to past occurrences that validate its truth. Crucially, this view treats tradition not as a passive inheritance but as an active reconstruction. It is not simply conserved but constantly remade in the present. This raises important psychological questions: what happens in the minds of those who transmit and receive traditions? Traditional anthropology often presumes the existence of shared mental models, but seldom tests how such models might function cognitively. Boyer argues that any serious theory of tradition must consider the psychological mechanisms involved in memory, attention, and categorisation. There are two common ways in which psychology has been integrated into anthropology. The first borrows directly from experimental psychology, applying tested theories to ethnographic data. The second—the more widespread approach—relies on intuitive speculation, treating the mind as a 'black box' and attributing behaviour to vaguely defined mental processes. Boyer criticizes this latter method, which he sees as masking ignorance behind empty terms such as 'conservatism', 'cultural models', or 'symbolic systems'. Instead, he proposes a third path: grounding anthropology in cognitive science to generate hypotheses that are testable and specific. A central idea in this framework is that tradition must be understood through its repetition. But repetition, too, is misunderstood. It is not simply the reiteration of ideas or beliefs; it is the reactivation of social interactions with recognisable forms. The form of the act—its language, gestures, timing—becomes memorable and repeatable. This repetition does not result from inertia but from the way humans process and store interactional patterns. Rather than relying on abstract theories of 'worldview preservation', the theory centres on observable, communicative events. This applies equally to traditional categories. Take, for example, concepts like 'mana' or 'evur', found in various cultures. These terms are often vague or resistant to definition, yet they play a vital role in social discourse. Their meaning is not fixed but shifts according to who speaks, in what context, and to what purpose. Boyer distinguishes three registers of discourse: everyday talk, gossip, and expert speech. In each, the same term may be used differently, and its authority varies. Experts—such as shamans or ritual specialists—do not rely on refined theories but on accumulated experience. Their credibility stems from memory and practice, not formal definition. Such concepts challenge both the structuralist notion of 'empty signifiers' and the intellectualist assumption that cultural terms represent coherent, shared theories. Instead, these categories work through partial overlap, emotional resonance, and pragmatic flexibility. They are not defined but demonstrated, not agreed upon in the abstract but enacted in context. In conclusion, Boyer's cognitive approach reframes tradition as a kind of communication: one that operates through repetition, memory, and performative acts. Rather than treating tradition as a static relic of the past, it must be studied as a dynamic interaction shaped by psychological constraints and cultural conventions. What counts as tradition is not merely what is old, but what is made meaningful through interaction—what is repeated, recognised, and believed in the moment of its telling.

Right hemisphere

Language is more than grammar and vocabulary. While the left hemisphere has long been associated with the nuts and bolts of linguistic function—syntax, phonology, and lexical access—the right hemisphere plays an equally vital but often overlooked role in making language meaningful in context. In their study 'The Role of the Right Hemisphere in the Apprehension of Complex Linguistic Materials[34]', Wendy Wapner, Suzanne Hamby, and Howard Gardner examine how damage to the right side of the brain affects narrative understanding, emotional nuance, and the capacity to make sense of layered or unexpected content. The researchers administered a detailed series of language-based tasks to patients with right-hemisphere lesions and compared their performance to that of left-hemisphere-damaged patients and two control groups. What they found was not a collapse in basic language skills—these patients could still recognise syntax, pronounce words clearly, and even recall sentences verbatim. But the life had gone out of their speech. They struggled to organise story elements, misunderstood emotional cues, and often failed to recognise when a story made no logical or emotional sense. Narrative, in this light, is not simply a sequence of events but a cognitive effort to weave together space, emotion, time, and expectation into something coherent. Right-hemisphere-damaged individuals found this difficult. When asked to rearrange shuffled story sentences into logical order, their answers veered off-course. They often offered justifications for absurdities instead of rejecting them, showing a diminished sense of plausibility and an inability to resolve contradictions. The emotional dimension was even more striking. In stories that relied on subtle shifts in feeling or unspoken tensions, these patients often misread characters' motives or applied rigid logic to scenes requiring empathy or ambiguity. Their responses were technically correct in a literal sense, but they lacked warmth or flexibility. Similarly, when asked to select punchlines for jokes, they either missed the twist or interpreted the humor as a critique of behaviour, failing to recognise the comic structure of setup and release. It was not that they did not understand language—it was that they could not step back from the literal surface and appreciate tone, irony, or contradiction. Even comparisons with aging control groups—who may experience cognitive slowing—revealed clear differences. Older adults might embellish or forget, but they still understood narrative purpose and maintained a sense of moral or emotional trajectory. Right-hemisphere patients, by contrast, often descended into disconnected or fragmented accounts. These findings reframe how one thinks about linguistic comprehension. The right hemisphere appears critical not for word use but for how words fit into broader frameworks of meaning: narrative structure, emotional resonance, and context-sensitive interpretation. Without this, language remains technically correct but experientially flat. Meaning, it turns out, lives in the integration—not just the form—of language.

[34] Wapner, W., Hamby, S. and Gardner, H. (1981). The role of the right hemisphere in the apprehension of complex linguistic materials. Brain and Language, 14(1), pp.15–33. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/0093-934x(81)90061-4.

3. PHENOMENOLOGY

3.1. The language phenomenon

(The speaking body: Phenomenology and the birth of expression)

'Speech does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it'.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

'The body is not an object in the world, but our means of communication with it'.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible

Study of experience

Phenomenology is the study of experience as it is lived, prior to its translation into theories, categories, or measurements. Rather than asking what things are or how they can be proven to exist, phenomenology begins with how they appear to consciousness—how the world shows itself through perception, memory, thought, and language. At its core, it is a philosophical attempt to describe the structures that make experience intelligible, without reducing it to abstractions or presupposing a split between the subject and the world. This attention to appearances, to the immediacy of the lifeworld, defines the method and spirit of phenomenological inquiry. Originating in the work of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology emerged in response to what he saw as the crisis of modern rationalism—the tendency of science and philosophy to overlook the basic fact of lived experience. Husserl urged a return 'to the things themselves', calling for the suspension of assumptions about external reality (a process he named epoché) to examine consciousness as it presents itself. He introduced concepts like intentionality—the idea that all consciousness is directed toward something—and eidetic variation, a method of imagining changes to a phenomenon to reveal its essential features. These tools were designed not to build a system but to uncover what he called the invariant structures of experience. Yet phenomenology quickly expanded beyond Husserl's framework. In 'The Prose of the World', Maurice Merleau-Ponty advanced a vision of phenomenology grounded in embodiment. For him, the body is not a container for thought but the very condition of perception. We do not inhabit a detached mind observing the world from a distance; rather, we are always already engaged in it through movement, sensation, and gesture. Perception is not a passive reception of stimuli, but an active interpretation shaped by bodily orientation and context. Language, in this view, is not simply a set of signs we apply to thoughts but a spontaneous, expressive act—the continuation of perception by other means. This embodied view of phenomenology places speech at the centre of meaning-making. Language is not a transparent conduit between minds; it is a terrain where meaning takes shape. Speaking is not merely naming but revealing. Words are sedimented with history and experience, and each act of expression is a reshaping of what has been said before. Merleau-Ponty sees language as the medium in which the world becomes visible to us and to others, a process always incomplete and open-ended. Martin Heidegger, another key figure in the phenomenological tradition, shifted the focus from consciousness to being. In 'Being and Time', he redefined phenomenology as an inquiry into what it means to exist. For Heidegger, humans (or Dasein) do not first think about the world and then act in it; they are always already situated in a world of concerns, tools, and relationships. Understanding, for him, is practical before it is

theoretical. This existential turn in phenomenology emphasised temporality, finitude, and the historical nature of meaning. Across these thinkers, phenomenology reveals itself not as a fixed doctrine but as a way of attending to experience—of noticing what is usually passed over in the rush to explain or measure. Whether through the analysis of perception, the articulation of pre-verbal understanding, or the description of how speech carries thought forward, phenomenology invites one to inhabit the ambiguity and richness of lived life. It reminds philosophy that before there are concepts, there is presence; before there are facts, there is meaning.

Merleau-Ponty on language

In his 1947–48 course 'Language and Communication' at the Université de Lyon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlined a powerful critique of how science and philosophy were thinking about language. His argument revolved around three key points: the limits of scientism, the inseparability of thought and language, and the importance of the speaking subject. Although his lectures were never officially published, they were preserved in student notes and later analysed by Hugh J. Silverman[35], who traced their impact on Merleau-Ponty's mature philosophy of expression. Merleau-Ponty's first target was scientism—the belief that scientific method alone can explain human experience. In psychology, he objected to experimental approaches that treated stimulus and response as isolated data points. He preferred the work of thinkers like Köhler, whose research with primates suggested that perception and problem-solving should be viewed holistically, as a restructuring of a field, not as linear cause, and effect. Likewise, in linguistics, Merleau-Ponty was wary of reducing speech to phonetics or brain mechanics. Instead, he turned to Saussure's distinction between 'langue'—language as a formal system—and 'parole'—individual speech. For Merleau-Ponty, this tension reflects a deeper truth: language is both structural and temporal, a rule-bound system, and a lived practice. Language, he argued, is not a tool that expresses a fully formed thought, nor is thought something that precedes its articulation. Rather, they emerge together. Thought is not waiting inside the mind to be dressed in words; it is formed in and through the act of speaking. Against Pavlovian behaviourism and the empiricism of early psychology, he insisted that language is intentional—that it is always directed toward meaning. Even when the words are habitual or automatic, they are steeped in context and history. And in moments of 'true speech', when something genuinely new is said, language reveals not just meaning but the very act of meaning-making. This led to his third point: communication is not the simple transfer of information but a shared, embodied act. The speaking subject is not an isolated mind projecting thoughts into space but a body in the world, already immersed in a web of meaning. We understand others not by decoding messages, but by silently 'reaccomplishing' their intentions—by living into their words. Language becomes a kind of shared gesture, a resonance between bodies, a form of coexistence. Meaning arises not from signs alone but from the encounter between subjects. These ideas would shape Merleau-Ponty's later work, especially 'The Prose of the World', where he further dismantled the notion of language as a closed system. Language, for him, is always tied to existence. It does not simply reflect the world but participates in it, embodying a tension between structure and spontaneity, between silence and expression. To speak is to enact a relation—to the self, to others, and to a world that is never fully given but always becoming.

[35] Silverman, H.J. (1985) 'Merleau-Ponty on Language', in Silverman, H.J. (ed.) Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming Contemporary Thought. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 67–89.

The prose of the world

To begin 'The Prose of the World[36]'(1973) is to risk falling into its spell—the very prose it seeks to unravel. Merleau-Ponty does not offer an introduction in the conventional sense but a philosophical gesture, where language and thought converge in a movement of mutual emergence. The text does not frame itself from the outside; it opens from within, inhabiting the tension between expression and silence, between saying and meaning. Language is not a tool here but a phenomenon—an event of visibility and understanding. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology avoids the abstraction of pure concepts. Language, for him, is not a neutral system of signs waiting to be decoded. It is a texture of lived experience. The voice does not merely transmit thought; it incarnates it. Each utterance, like a gesture, arises from a body situated in the world. Thus, speaking is a way of seeing and showing, not simply naming. The philosopher does not analyze language as an object but listens for what it discloses about being. Beneath the grammar of statements lies a deeper grammar of presence—what he calls the 'prose' of the world. This prose is not the opposite of poetry, but the fabric of communication before it hardens into code. A statement like 'it is raining' seems transparent, yet it already enacts a certain world: a shared weather, a background of sense. In contrast, poetry, prayer, and narrative do not merely embellish communication; they return language to its expressive origin. They resist the flattening of signs into sheer transmission. For Merleau-Ponty, this flattening reaches its limit in the scientific ideal of a pure language, a perfect algorithm free from ambiguity. Such language dreams of a correspondence between symbol and world so exact that interpretation vanishes. But this dream is a refusal of speech's essential opacity. The ideal of a universal language, underlying many rationalist traditions, presumes that truth can be extracted from language and fixed in symbols. It seeks a pre-linguistic logos, a divine code beneath speech, visible in thought itself. But Merleau-Ponty shows that this ideal collapses when confronted with the materiality of language—the voice, the gesture, the silence between words. Expression is never purely transmission. The meaning of a word changes with its tone, its context, its rhythm. Even the most logical proposition speaks differently when whispered or shouted. The writer, too, believes in a best expression—one phrase among many that perfectly fits the thought. But this belief is born of surprise when words come not from calculation but from the body's own familiarity with the world. The thought was not fully formed before it was spoken; it came into being with its phrase. Thus, language does not wrap a finished idea. It creates it. Even the purest signs—mathematical, algorithmic—fail without an interpreter. Meaning is never in the sign alone but in the encounter. A signal only speaks if someone listens. Language is not the substitution of signs for thoughts; it is the unfolding of thought in the space between people. A message, however clear, means nothing without this shared space. The death of a loved one is not real because it is known, but because it is lived. In this way, language touches the world not as a mirror, but as a hand. The illusion of a transparent language gives rise to the paradox: language reveals, yet the more we try to capture it, the more it slips away. Every attempt to grasp meaning as an object leads to the suspicion that communication is a lie. But Merleau-Ponty refuses this despair. He affirms the voice not because it is clear but because it speaks from the thickness of the world. Language is not a thing that exists but a happening, a passage—a moment where the world shows itself in words, only to retreat again. It is this movement that makes philosophy possible and keeps its voice alive.

The indirect language

Language and painting may seem like distant forms of expression, but both engage in the same fundamental task: translating the silent, pre-reflective world into something that speaks.

[36] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973) The Prose of the World. Northwestern University Press.

With the idea of 'the indirect language', Maurice Merleau-Ponty draws this parallel not to collapse the difference between visual and verbal art, but to illuminate how both forms of expression reshape perception into meaning. Neither painter nor writer reproduces reality as it is; rather, they make it visible—or intelligible—through composition, gesture, and form. Language, like colour, does not point to meaning from outside, but unfolds it from within. This idea unsettles the classical notion that language should be clear, precise, and direct, like a well-polished tool. Against the fantasy of a 'pure language' that would transparently express thought or truth, Merleau-Ponty proposes that true communication is always indirect. Words, like brushstrokes, do not merely convey ideas; they evoke, distort, resonate. Style—whether in literature or painting—is not an embellishment but the very form in which something becomes visible. Language does not operate by representing objects already there; it brings them into presence through the act of speaking or writing. Modern art, as Merleau-Ponty notes, offers a striking illustration of this shift. Where classical painting aimed at faithful representation, modern painters began to explore the unseen—what is felt, sensed, intuited beneath appearances. The visible is not simply what meets the eye, but what emerges through a particular way of seeing. Likewise, modern literature breaks with the assumption that language must transmit a stable message. Writers become aware of language's opacity, its resistance to total clarity. Expression is not about overcoming ambiguity but dwelling within it. Meaning, rather than being given in advance, arises through the encounter between the work and the one who receives it. This emphasis on indirection also reveals a deeper philosophical claim: that perception itself is expressive. We do not first see the world and then translate it into words or images. Perception already carries meaning, shaped by our embodiment, history, and affective orientation. The painter does not impose order on chaos but responds to a world already speaking, albeit silently. Language, then, is a continuation of this responsiveness. To speak is not merely to code an inner thought but to respond to a world that asks to be said. The indirectness of expression is not a weakness but a condition of depth. A finished work is never truly complete; its meaning unfolds over time, through repetition, interpretation, and dialogue. Each new context reactivates its latent possibilities. Language, like art, opens a space where individual and collective histories intersect, where the past is reanimated and the future glimpsed. In this light, Merleau-Ponty's meditation on language becomes a meditation on human presence itself. Speaking, painting, writing—these are not secondary activities but ways of inhabiting the world and offering it to others. Indirectness is not the failure of expression, but the very mode through which meaning is made.

Saussure's phenomenology

Ferdinand de Saussure is most often remembered as the founding figure of structuralist linguistics. His 'Cours de linguistique générale' introduced the influential distinction between signifier and signified, along with the idea that the relationship between the two is arbitrary. This became the cornerstone of twentieth-century structuralism, widely adopted in fields from anthropology to psychoanalysis. But as Beata Stawarska argues in 'Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology[37]', the Saussure we inherit from the 'Course' may not reflect the depth and complexity of his original thinking. The 'Course', published after Saussure's death by his students Bally and Sechehaye, has long been treated as authoritative. Yet it was assembled from lecture notes and recollections, shaped by editorial choices that emphasised system over subject, synchronic structure over diachronic flux. This editorial bias played a significant role in canonising Saussure as a structuralist. But as Stawarska shows, Saussure's

[37] Stawarska, B. (2015) Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics. New York: Oxford University Press.

unpublished manuscripts—the 'Nachlass'—tell a different story. There, the speaking subject is not erased but actively present, and language is not merely a system, but a phenomenon embedded in time, society, and experience. The standard reading of Saussure sets up a sharp contrast between structuralism and phenomenology: one focuses on language as an impersonal system; the other on consciousness and lived experience. But this opposition may be overstated. Stawarska reveals that Saussure was already thinking in terms that blur the boundaries between structure and subjectivity. He saw language not only as a network of differences but also as an activity shaped by the speaker's historical and social context. Meaning arises not solely from contrasts between signs but also from the temporality and embodiment of speech. Saussure's well-known critique of the 'nomenclature' model of language—where words are simply labels for pre-existing things—already points toward a more dynamic theory of meaning. He insists that language does not name a pre-given reality; instead, it carves out concepts through the system of oppositions internal to language itself. But in the 'Nachlass', this position is extended. The arbitrariness of the sign is shown to be not absolute but relative to shared histories and practices. Language is not a closed structure; it evolves, sedimented through use yet constantly reanimated by the speaking subject. This view has profound implications for how we understand communication. Rather than picturing language as a static system imposed on passive speakers, Saussure—when read through Stawarska's lens—emerges as a thinker of expression and intersubjectivity. Language is a space of tension between constraint and creativity, between the given and the emergent. Speakers do not control language absolutely, but neither are they merely its puppets. They inhabit it, reshape it, improvise within it. Revisiting Saussure through his 'Nachlass' thus enables a reconciliation between structural and phenomenological approaches. It suggests a philosophy of language in which form, and subjectivity are not opposed but entwined—language as both a structure and an event, both sediment and speech, both history and presence.

To the things themselves

Phenomenology, often viewed as a philosophical method rooted in introspection and subjectivity, has in fact evolved into a diverse and dynamic tradition with significant implications for the social sciences. Maurice Roche, in 'Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences[38]', argues that despite internal divergences, phenomenology remains anchored by a shared commitment: to remain faithful to the phenomena as they appear, not as they are theorised or reduced by external frameworks. This central principle—'to the things themselves'—distinguishes phenomenology from both positivist science and classical empiricism. Where empiricism focuses on observable facts, phenomenology turns its attention to lived experience, where perception and meaning are inseparable. It does not abandon reality but reorients the inquiry: what matters is not what reality is presumed to be, but how it is encountered and made meaningful by human consciousness. This orientation is traced the idea of intentionality: the notion that consciousness is always directed toward something. A thought, a fear, a memory—each points beyond itself. This directedness forms the core of phenomenological analysis. There is a distinction between introspection, often misleadingly passive, and 'inner perception', which he saw as an immediate awareness of mental activity. Consciousness, in this view, is active and relational, always in motion toward objects, situations, or others. Husserl transformed these insights into a philosophical project he called pure phenomenology. Seeking to establish a rigorous foundation for all knowledge, Husserl introduced the method of epoché, or bracketing. This meant suspending the 'natural attitude',

[38] Roche, M. (1973) 'Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences', Human Studies, 1(2), pp. 123–142.

the uncritical assumption that the world exists independently and self-evidently. By setting aside this assumption, Husserl aimed to uncover the essential structures of experience. Yet, while this method aspired to objectivity through reflection, it was later criticised for neglecting the bodily, historical, and social dimensions of life. This critique found voice in the existential phenomenology of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sartre replaced Husserl's focus on essences with a philosophy of freedom and self-awareness. Consciousness, for Sartre, was not a static receptacle but a restless project—a being-for-itself, defined not by what it is but by what it is not yet. This existential freedom, however, comes with anxiety and bad faith, as individuals often seek refuge in social roles that obscure their freedom. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, emphasised embodiment. In 'Phenomenology of Perception', he argued that perception is not a mental representation of the world but an active bodily engagement with it. The body, for him, is not an object but the subject of perception. This reconfiguration brought phenomenology closer to lived experience, to the 'Lebenswelt' or life-world, and made it relevant to questions of language, social interaction, and culture. It is here that phenomenology becomes particularly fruitful for the social sciences. As Roche shows, Alfred Schutz extended Husserl's ideas into sociology, exploring how shared meanings and typifications allow people to navigate everyday life. Rather than seeking universal laws, Schutz focused on the structures of meaning that arise in intersubjective communication. Language, in this framework, is not just a medium for transmitting information but a practice through which social reality is constructed and maintained. Phenomenology thus challenges the assumptions of scientific objectivity and insists that any meaningful inquiry into society must begin with lived experience. It shows that language, thought, and perception are not private phenomena but inherently social. This insight allows phenomenology to bridge the gap between philosophy and empirical inquiry, offering tools for analysing how people inhabit, interpret, and co-construct the world they share.

Living body of language

Horst Ruthrof's 'Husserl's Phenomenology of Natural Language[39]' explores how meaning arises through imagination, intersubjectivity, and cultural embeddedness. Drawing from Husserl, Ruthrof argues that natural language is not a mere system of signs, but a dynamic field of intentional acts shaped by both individual consciousness and communal norms. Central to this approach is the idea that linguistic meaning hinges on the ability to imagine, and be imagined, in the act of communication. For Husserl, meaning is not grounded in truth or reference to external objects. Instead, it arises through the 'Vorstellbarkeit'—the capacity of linguistic expressions to evoke mental images or imagined scenarios. This imaginability has two facets. First, speakers must form vivid internal images in response to language. Second, language must convey content in a way that others can imagine and re-enact. These two operations occur simultaneously, making meaning an event that binds subjects together through shared imaginative acts. While early in his career Husserl focused on the internal logic of subjective acts of meaning, his later writings increasingly acknowledged the social nature of language. Ruthrof shows how Husserl began to see even solitary linguistic expression as rooted in communal expectations. Meaning is never fully private; it unfolds within the 'speech community' and carries with it a kind of social obligation. This is what Husserl called 'Zumutung', the demand placed on individuals by collective linguistic norms. Husserl's turn to intersubjectivity marks a shift from viewing language as a personal system to treating it as a communal process of imaginative reconstruction. The social reality of language is not just

[39] Ruthrof, H. (2021) Husserl's Phenomenology of Natural Language: Intersubjectivity and Communality in the Nachlass. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

external, as in social convention, but internalised through the intentional structure of each speech act. Every expression presupposes a shared world in which meanings can be made intelligible. Hence, phenomenological inquiry must not only describe inner experiences but also trace the relational processes through which language gains significance. Ruthrof interprets this through a tripartite ontological framework: language partakes of materiality (its physical sounds or inscriptions), ideality (the abstract structures and categories), and intentionality (the shared acts of consciousness that generate meaning). Husserl's phenomenology insists that it is this third layer—intentionality—that makes language what it is: a lived and imaginative process. Even syntax and grammar are not merely structural forms but sedimented experiences, crystallised over time through communal use. The concept of 'Sprachleib', or the 'living body of language', captures this complexity. Language is not a dead code but an embodied, moving, and socially inhabited phenomenon. Each word carries a tone, a direction of intention, and an implicit social horizon. The 'Ton' of an utterance—its mood, affect, and implied stance—contributes to its meaning just as much as its propositional content. Husserl's contribution, as Ruthrof argues, is to place this imaginative, intersubjective, and cultural reality at the centre of linguistic theory. Language, then, is not an external system we use but a social mode of being that binds people through shared acts of imagining and understanding.

Phenomenology of language

James E. Dublin's 'Language as Expression of the Upright Man: Toward a Phenomenology of Language and the Lived-Body[40]' presents a powerful synthesis of phenomenological thought, grounding language not in abstract systems but in the bodily structure of human existence. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Straus, Dublin situates language as a living, expressive movement of the upright body—a gesture of Being made possible by the unique human capacity for embodied transcendence. At the core of this analysis is the idea that the body is not an object among others but the site of meaning. Merleau-Ponty insists that it is not consciousness, but the lived-body that structures experience. Language emerges from this corporeal foundation, not as a detachable tool but as an extension of the body's perceptive and expressive powers. Even the most abstract linguistic forms are rooted in bodily gestures and postures. The phrase 'my last breath', for example, carries an evocative meaning not because of its grammar, but because it condenses bodily experience into communicable form, transforming fleeting life into symbolic permanence. Heidegger's famous claim that 'language is the house of Being' finds resonance here. Dublin emphasises that words are not inert signs but events that expose, stretch, and reveal. Etymology, in this view, is not a historical curiosity but a means of recovering the forgotten layers of meaning sedimented in language. The body, like language, harbours this depth. It is both the subject that speaks and the object that resonates. In Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, this dual structure becomes 'l'Etre sauvage', the wild Being from which all distinctions—subject and object, body, and word—emerge. Language thus reflects a paradox: it transcends time and the body yet is inseparable from the body's presence in the world. The upright posture becomes a symbol of this transcendence. Straus and Griffith describe how standing frees the hands for gestural expression and elevates the human gaze, allowing reflection and symbolic articulation. Dublin draws on mythological and ritual imagery—trees, limbs, trunks—to show how the human body is metaphorically and structurally embedded in the natural world, and how language draws from this embeddedness to speak beyond it. Sensory experiences like taste, sound, and breath are reinterpreted as expressions of a unified body-world relation. Taste, which joins interior and

[40] Dublin, J.E. (1972) 'Language as Expression of Upright Man: Toward a Phenomenology of Language and the Lived-Body', Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 2(2), p. 141.

exterior, becomes a metaphor for judgment. Laughter, sighs, gasps—each sound carries affective weight, revealing the world not as a collection of facts but as a field of significance. Language does not simply name these expressions—it arises with them. Dublin concludes that language is not separate from Being but a reflection of it. Beneath every conceptual term lies a bodily resonance. Language is the continuation of the body's silent gestures, shaped by uprightness, extended into meaning. It is through this lived-body, poised between the earth and the symbolic, that speech gains its vitality.

3.2. The language of the self

(Subjectivity in speech: Saying 'I' and being heard)

'To say 'I' is already to enter into a story not wholly one's own'.

— Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself

The self and its language

In 'The Self and Its Language[41]', Harold A. Durfee and David F. T. Rodier gather a range of philosophical essays that take on the subtle and elusive problem of the first-person pronoun—'I'. At once a grammatical sign and a metaphysical cipher, the 'I' reveals how tightly language is bound to subjectivity. This small pronoun encapsulates centuries of reflection on selfhood, from Descartes' 'cogito' to Foucault's 'death of the subject', but it also resists reduction to mere philosophical abstraction. The 'I' speaks not only of interiority but of the very conditions by which interiority becomes speakable. The volume explores how the self is shaped, expressed, and destabilised through language. Some contributions adopt the phenomenological view of consciousness as intentional and directed, while others draw from analytic philosophy, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and theology. Across these diverse perspectives, a shared concern emerges: the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process—reflective, embodied, and ethically entangled. Topics include the moral foundations of intersubjectivity, the tension between individual freedom and inherited traditions, and the role of bodily expression in unconscious life. The relation between presence, absence, and Being is examined alongside the idea that the self arises through its participation in historical, linguistic, and cultural structures. Art and language are presented as spaces in which existence is disclosed, and the self becomes expressible. Later discussions foreground the linguistic turn, emphasising the performative and self-referential nature of first-person language. Ultimately, the self is shown not to pre-exist language, but to be formed within it—always situated in a shared world of meaning and response. By tracing the paths where language and selfhood converge, this volume reveals the self not as something hidden behind words but as something constituted by them. Language is not merely how the self expresses itself; it is where the self emerges. These essays remind the reader that to say 'I' is already to enter a network of meanings, histories, and responsibilities. The 'I' is never solitary—it always speaks to and through others.

Language and being

Stephen A. Erickson's 'Language and Being: An Analytic Phenomenology[42]' explores the intersection of language, meaning, and human experience by using Heidegger's early

[41] Durfee, H.A. & Rodier, D.F.T. (eds) (1989) Phenomenology and Beyond: The Self and Its Language. Contributions to Phenomenology, Vol 3. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[42] Erickson, S.A. (2015). Language and being: an analytic phenomenology. [online] Philpapers.org. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/ERILAB [Accessed 20 Jul. 2025].

philosophy as a point of departure. Erickson approaches three enduring philosophical questions—What is meaning? What is the philosophical role of language? What is a human world?—with the aim of clarifying their interrelation and philosophical significance. Rather than treating these questions in isolation, Erickson views them as converging at a conceptual crossroad that demands both phenomenological sensitivity and analytic rigor. Heidegger's work, especially 'Being and Time' and 'An Introduction to Metaphysics', serves as both a foundation and a challenge. Erickson does not merely follow Heidegger but interrogates his central assumptions, attempting to translate Heidegger's more opaque ideas into a vocabulary accessible to both analytic and phenomenological traditions. The goal is not to simplify but to render more visible the stakes of Heidegger's thinking on Being and its entanglement with language. One of Erickson's main concerns is the way the Western philosophical tradition, rooted in Greek ontology, has reified the concept of Being. Heidegger argues that this reification—treating Being as if it were a distinct entity—originates in the linguistic structures of Greek and German thought. For instance, the infinitive form 'to be' (sein) is inherently indeterminate, much like verbal nouns such as 'dreaming' or 'falling'. Heidegger suggests that this grammatical indeterminacy reflects the philosophical emptiness that arises when Being is mistaken for a stable concept. According to him, completing a sentence like 'Being is…' feels odd because the subject Being resists objectification; it slips out of linguistic precision. Erickson finds this observation central: language not only reflects but subtly shapes our understanding of metaphysical problems. While Heidegger appeals to Greek etymology to critique modern ontology, Erickson draws parallels with thinkers like J.L. Austin, who also recognised how language's history conditions its philosophical uses. Yet where Austin advocated for conceptual multiplicity, Heidegger believed that a single dominant model—originating in Greek metaphysics—has silently governed Western thought's view of Being. This model has shaped not only metaphysical assumptions but also how language functions within philosophical discourse. Erickson contends that if Being has been misunderstood due to linguistic habits, then philosophical progress requires a linguistic turn that is both historical and analytic. Understanding Being thus becomes inseparable from understanding how language encodes meaning. He follows Heidegger's critique with the aim of constructing an alternative framework—one that acknowledges the historical burden of inherited concepts while striving toward a more reflective, perhaps pluralistic, approach to language and ontology. What emerges is a call for a revisionary practice in philosophy: one that does not discard Heidegger but redeploys him. Erickson's analytic phenomenology seeks to clarify not only what Being means but how such meaning becomes possible through the grammar, history, and lived use of language.

Epistemology of language

Cheng-hung Tsai's 'On the Epistemology of Language[43]' rethinks a foundational assumption in linguistic theory: that to speak a language competently is to possess some form of internal knowledge about that language. Rather than asking what kind of knowledge a speaker must have, Tsai asks what it means to be a speaker at all. The shift is subtle but profound. Language, on this view, becomes less about rule-following and more about a lived, interpretative relationship shaped by character, cooperation, and social sensibility. At the centre of Tsai's critique is Donald Davidson's well-known 'dispensability thesis', which argues that communication does not rely on pre-shared semantic rules. According to Davidson, speaking

[43] Tsai, C.-H. (2006) 'On the Epistemology of Language', Southern Journal of Philosophy, 44(4), pp. 677–696.

is not like consulting a mental grammar. Instead, meaning emerges in context, through dynamic negotiation between speaker and listener. Davidson's concepts of 'prior theory' and 'passing theory' capture this—what one brings to a conversation versus what one constructs in the moment. Successful communication, then, depends not on fixed rules but on interpretative flexibility. This flexibility, however, cannot be arbitrary. Tsai addresses the so-called 'Humpty Dumpty problem'—the worry that without rules, meaning collapses into solipsism. But Davidson's point is not that anything goes. Rather, meaningful speech arises from a shared commitment to understanding. When Humpty Dumpty says a word means 'just what I choose it to mean', he rejects that commitment. In contrast, the humor of Mrs. Malaprop lies in her unintentional deviation from linguistic norms—she errs, but her intentions remain intelligible. The difference lies in virtue. This is where Tsai introduces his virtue-theoretic model of linguistic competence. Borrowing from virtue epistemology, he argues that speaking well involves interpretative virtues—dispositions that aim at mutual understanding. These include charity (interpreting others generously), interpretability (making oneself understandable), sincerity (speaking truthfully), and cooperation (aligning with shared goals). Competent speakers are not those who possess a rulebook, but those who engage with others in ways that cultivate trust and intelligibility. In this model, linguistic knowledge is not foundational but emergent. It is not something one must have in advance, but something that develops through practice, attention, and moral sensibility. Rules of language, far from being fixed, are the sedimented results of countless virtuous interactions. From this angle, the epistemology of language is less about decoding syntax and more about understanding the ethical and social habits that make language possible. Tsai's contribution is to reconnect the study of language with human character. By shifting the focus from formal structures to interpretative virtues, he provides a compelling account of how meaning arises—not through strict adherence to rules, but through the interplay of intention, trust, and shared purpose.

Language and phenomenology

In 'Language and Phenomenology[44]', Chad Engelland explores the deep and often overlooked relationship between speech and experience, proposing that phenomenology has a unique contribution to make in the philosophy of language. Where analytic approaches tend to analyze meaning through propositions, reference, or truth-conditions, phenomenology returns to lived experience, asking how language arises from and discloses the world as it appears to consciousness. Phenomenology, at its core, is the study of appearance—how things show themselves to us. Language is not simply a vessel for labelling those appearances but part of how things appear at all. Engelland notes that while figures like Wittgenstein and Quine are standard in linguistic philosophy, phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty treat language less as a formal system and more as an existential structure—integral to how humans inhabit and interpret the world. Husserl's 'Logical Investigations' marks a foundational shift by treating meaning as intentional—shaped by how the subject intends or directs experience. Language, therefore, is not added to thought afterward, but entwined with it from the beginning, as the very medium through which meaning becomes articulate. Yet phenomenology also seems strangely silent on language. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observed, despite its reliance on speech, phenomenology often treats language as a background condition rather than a primary topic. Husserl focused largely on logic and ideal meanings, bracketing the social and contingent aspects of speech. Heidegger, too, was sceptical of traditional philosophies of language, preferring to speak of logos as an originary revealing, a way of 'letting be'. This reluctance, however, should not be mistaken for disinterest. Instead, Engelland shows

[44] Engelland, C. (ed.) (2020) Language and Phenomenology. New York: Routledge.

that phenomenology seeks to avoid reifying language—to resist treating it as a thing, a system of signs detached from experience. Rather than objectify language, phenomenologists trace it back to its source in lived, embodied communication. For Merleau-Ponty, this source lies in the body. The spoken word is not merely emitted by a neutral speaker—it emerges from a gesturing, sensing body in the world. Speech is a bodily act, not reducible to grammar or phonetics. When a child learns to speak, they do not memorise rules—they inhabit gestures, tones, rhythms. This corporeal grounding of language allows phenomenology to reconnect linguistic meaning with the intersubjective structure of experience—how people share a world through shared gestures and speech. Engelland emphasises the importance of 'pre-predicative' experience—those levels of meaning that come before full propositions or judgments. For example, the look on a loved one's face, a tone of voice, a gesture of hesitation: these are forms of meaning that precede and inform language. Rather than discard these as ineffable, phenomenology tries to describe them, to let them be seen as meaningful. Language becomes the unfolding of such meanings into form, not their replacement. This approach has profound consequences. It reframes philosophical questions: not 'What is the meaning of this sentence?' but 'How does this word come to mean what it does, in this moment, for these people?' Meaning is no longer timeless or abstract, but historical, embodied, and intersubjective. Recent developments have extended this view further, integrating insights from linguistics, developmental psychology, and hermeneutics. Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work on expression and silence, as well as Heidegger's reflections on poetic language, suggest that language not only conveys but also shapes the world. Poets, like philosophers, do not merely describe—they disclose new ways of seeing. Engelland's work thus opens a space where language is not just studied but lived. Phenomenology, in this light, becomes a listening as much as a speaking—a way of attending to the world through the subtle vibrations of speech, silence, and gesture.

The emergence of meaning

In 'Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language[45]', James M. Edie offers a compelling account of how meaning arises not from abstract structures or empirical facts alone, but from the lived, situated use of language. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Edie resists the reduction of language to formal logic or syntactical codes. Instead, he frames it as a dynamic, embodied process—one through which humans create, disclose, and transform meaning in real time. His approach balances subjectivism and objectivism by showing how personal expression and linguistic norms interact, not in opposition, but in mutual dependency. Phenomenology has long sought to account for the interplay between consciousness and the world. Edie applies this task to language by examining how meaning emerges through la parole—actual speech acts—rather than solely from la langue, the system of linguistic rules. While structuralists emphasise language as a self-contained system, Edie insists that meaning is also generated anew in every utterance. It is the creative tension between sedimented structure and living expression that gives rise to the richness of linguistic life. Edie begins by revisiting Edmund Husserl's theory of 'pure logical grammar'. Husserl proposed that beneath the flux of speech lies a set of a priori laws governing meaningful expression. These structures, while ideal and universal, make possible the formation of intelligible discourse. Yet Edie critiques this emphasis on syntax, suggesting it neglects the temporal and bodily nature of speech. While Husserl's formalism secures clarity and consistency, it risks severing language from the world of perception, gesture, and lived interaction. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty brings the body back into the centre of linguistic experience. For him, speech is not an abstract operation but a

[45] Edie, J.M. (1976) Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

gestural act—words are movements of thought made visible and audible. Meaning is not fixed in signs but emerges through expressive encounters between people and their world. Edie highlights this shift as crucial: speech is neither entirely constructed nor passively received; it is enacted. The speaker does not merely select pre-existing meanings but reshapes them in context. This understanding becomes most vivid in Edie's discussion of metaphor and polysemy. Following Paul Ricoeur, Edie sees metaphor not as an ornamental feature of speech but as the engine of new meaning. Metaphors allow us to bridge familiar categories and articulate novel insights. They function as creative tools that reveal dimensions of reality otherwise hidden by literal speech. Meaning, in this view, is never simply given; it is discovered, often by bending the rules of language rather than following them. Edie's argument also redefines philosophical method. Rather than seeking an ideal language purified of ambiguity, he aligns with Heidegger's view of language as disclosure. Truth is not correspondence, but *uncovering*. The philosopher's task is not to reduce language to formulae but to interpret its unfolding—how it gestures beyond itself, invites resonance, and opens the world. This leads Edie to hermeneutics, where meaning is not static but historical, shaped by time, context, and dialogue. Each act of reading or speaking participates in an ongoing reinterpretation that sustains the vitality of meaning. Ultimately, Edie's phenomenology of language demonstrates that meaning is not an object to be retrieved but a process that unfolds within speech. Language is both constraint and freedom, tradition, and invention. It draws on a shared background of norms and expectations but remains open to rupture, transformation, and play. This duality—of form and expression, structure, and spontaneity—is where meaning emerges.

Information and reality

For centuries, science understood reality through the lens of solid matter. Newton's universe was a machine, driven by particles and predictable laws. Everything, from stars to human thought, could be reduced to motion and matter. But this classical view began to fall apart in the twentieth century. The rise of thermodynamics, relativity, and quantum theory forced scientists to rethink what the universe is made of. Slowly, matter gave way to something less tangible: information. In 'Information and the Nature of Reality[46]', edited by Paul Davies and Niels Henrik Gregersen, contributors trace this shift from physics to metaphysics. They argue that information may be more fundamental than matter or energy. As Davies puts it, perhaps the universe is not a collection of things, but of relationships, encoded in information itself. The first major break came with Einstein's relativity. It showed that mass and energy are interchangeable and that space and time are not fixed. Matter became less like billiard balls and more like ripples in fields. Yet even this left the classical idea of 'stuff' mostly intact. It was quantum theory that truly transformed the picture. In quantum mechanics, particles are not solid objects. They are probabilities, tendencies, mathematical abstractions. The wave function does not describe what a particle is, but what one knows—or does not know—about it. Information becomes central: the act of observation changes what is real. Seth Lloyd, one contributor, suggests that the universe behaves like a quantum computer. Its evolution is the processing of qubits—units of quantum information. Biology, too, is now framed in terms of information. DNA carries the instructions for life. Proteins are built from coded messages. The cell is not just a bag of chemicals—it is a processor of instructions, a semiotic system. John Maynard Smith and others in the volume argue that life is fundamentally about information storage and transfer, not material substance. This shift raises difficult questions. What is information,

[46] Davies, P. and Gregersen, N.H. (eds) (2010) Information and the Nature of Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

really? Claude Shannon's theory helped engineers design communication systems, but it left out meaning. Shannon information is about possible states, not what those states signify. But in biology, language, and thought, meaning matters. A signal only becomes information when someone—or something—interprets it. Terrence Deacon and Bernd-Olaf Küppers address this problem by showing how information needs context. Meaning emerges not from the signal itself, but from how it relates to a system's survival or goals. The organism does not just receive signals—it interprets them, acts on them, and reshapes its world. Information is not static. It is dynamic, tied to entropy, thermodynamics, and evolution. Finally, the book explores how these ideas might affect theology and philosophy. Arthur Peacocke and others suggest that if information underlies reality, it might be the bridge between mind and matter, science, and spirituality. God, in this view, could be understood not as a distant creator, but as the principle of order and relation embedded in information itself. In this emerging paradigm, the universe is not made of things but of messages—patterns, codes, and interpretations. Matter is what information does when it has structure. The real, at its core, is not a substance but a relation.

Belief ascriptions

In Jane Heal's 'Revisiting a Wittgensteinian Account of Belief[47]' attention shifts away from the idea that beliefs are internal, hidden mental states that can be detected or inspected. Instead, it proposes that belief is a concept embedded in public linguistic practices—something people learn to use and recognise through social training. From this standpoint, saying 'I believe that he is stupid' is not a neutral report of a private state but a performative move within a shared system of meaning. The habit of belief, then, is not about discovering a thing inside the mind, but participating in the ordinary grammar of conviction and assertion. This reframing becomes particularly helpful in addressing puzzles like Moore's paradox: 'It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining' or 'It is raining, but I believe that it is not raining'. This utterance appears contradictory not because it expresses two conflicting propositions, but because of how belief functions performatively. When one says, 'I believe that he is stupid', they are effectively asserting 'stupidity' with an added layer of control or even ownership. Adding 'but he is not' collapses the coherence of the original act. The contradiction does not lie in factual inconsistency alone but in the violation of the norms of self-ascription. The Wittgensteinian view thus treats belief as partially constituted through first-person expression. Belief is not a pre-existing state that a speaker simply discovers and reports, but a disposition that finds its form in linguistic behaviour. This is especially clear when considering how people learn to use psychological terms. Children are not trained to observe internal mental events but to react and speak in ways consistent with community norms. Saying 'I believe he is stupid' is part of learning how to participate in a social world that values reasons, commitments, and trustworthiness. This account reconciles the apparent asymmetry between first-person and third-person belief ascriptions. In third-person contexts, belief is typically inferred from behaviour—speech, choices, expressions. In first-person contexts, however, belief can be declared without appeal to evidence. This is not because individuals have privileged access to mental mechanisms, but because, within a language-game, their avowal is constitutive. Belief is shown not by internal inspection but by participating correctly in the practice of belief-talk. A key insight of this approach is that sincerity becomes a condition of authority. If someone says, 'I believe that he is stupid', and they are sincere, the statement is treated as a definitive avowal. But if there is evidence of insincerity or confusion, the claim may lose its normative weight. Thus, sincerity and rational self-awareness form the basis of authority, not metaphysical

[47] Heal, J. (2003) 'Revisiting a Wittgensteinian Account of Belief', in Mind, Reason and Imagination: Selected Essays in Philosophy of Mind and Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 157–176.

access to private entities. This performative model aligns belief with other speech acts like promising. Just as the act of saying 'I promise' brings a promise into being, saying 'I believe' under the right conditions brings belief into its final, public form. This challenges models that locate belief exclusively inside the mind and invites a broader reflection on how language structures the inner and outer aspects of thought.

The value of true belief

In 'The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding[48]', Jonathan L. Kvanvig revisits an old question: why do we value knowledge? He starts with something simpler—true belief. If knowledge includes true belief, then understanding what makes belief valuable might tell us something about the worth of knowledge itself. Socrates, in *Meno*, claims that true belief is almost as useful as knowledge. If someone knows the way to Larissa, or merely believes it correctly, they both get there. So, the practical function of true belief—its role in guiding action—is key. When you want to relieve a headache, believing that aspirin will help gives direction. Wanting alone is not enough. Belief gets you moving. Still, belief is not always seen as good. Ancient Pyrrhonists, for instance, argued against forming beliefs at all. They proposed living without belief, guided only by appearances. Their goal was peace of mind. But Kvanvig shows that even this radical scepticism struggles to account for ordinary decision-making. Appearances can help with basic instincts, but they do not offer much for things like planning a career or navigating laws. For those, belief—about cause, effect, and possibility—is hard to avoid. A softer version, urbane Pyrrhonism, suggests we should trust belief in practical matters, but not in abstract or philosophical areas. This is not as disruptive. It sees belief as something like pain—sometimes bad, but often necessary. It does not deny belief's role in guiding us through life. Once we accept that belief matters, the next question is: why does true belief matter? Some philosophers think truth has little value. They point to theories like Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism, which says it is enough if beliefs match observable data. Whether they are true does not matter, so long as they work. In this view, truth is a luxury, not a necessity. But Kvanvig disagrees. He argues that truth satisfies a different kind of need—a deeper intellectual desire. Suppose a theory fits all the facts, but you later find out it is false. Even if nothing changes in practice, you will feel deceived. That feeling tells us something important. It is not just about utility. Truth speaks to the need for coherence, for integrity in our understanding. Some, like Ernest Sosa, say that truth is only valuable when it lines up with interests. A trivial truth—like the number of pebbles on a beach—does not matter unless you care about it. But Kvanvig counters that the desire for truth is general. We want the truth about what matters to us, but the value is still in truth itself. The problem lies in the context, not in truth's worth. In the end, Kvanvig defends a position that is both simple and deep. True belief is valuable—not just because it helps us act, but because it answers our intellectual needs. Truth has value, and belief gains value by aiming at it. Knowledge, then, is more than true belief—it is belief grounded in something normative: justification, reliability, or understanding. What matters is not just getting it right, but why it is right.

3.3. Psychophenomenology

(Hacking the Self: NLP and the engineering of thinking)

'There is no failure, only feedback'.

[48] Kvanvig, J.L. (2003) The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Psychophenomenology

Psychophenomenology[49] is an emerging approach that seeks to integrate elements of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and phenomenology to explore and articulate human experience in a more nuanced and structured way. Though drawn from distinct traditions—NLP from applied psychology and communication training, and phenomenology from philosophy and qualitative research—their intersection opens new possibilities for understanding how individuals perceive, describe, and transform their internal world. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is based on the premise that there is a close connection between neurological processes, language use, and behavioural patterns. The foundation of NLP rests on the assumption that people do not react to reality itself, but to their mental maps of it. These maps are shaped by language, memory, and perception. In the end, NLP is more of a toolkit for manipulation and control than a theory. It offers techniques that some find useful—ways to notice patterns in speech or reframe problems—but it does not provide a full explanation of how communication functions. Developed in the 1970s, NLP proposes that by altering how people internally represent experiences—through sensory-based coding and linguistic framing—they can influence their behaviours, emotions, and outcomes. Core techniques in NLP include mirroring, anchoring, and reframing, which aim to align communication, build rapport, and shift unproductive mental patterns. Central to NLP is the concept of the 'map of reality', the idea that people do not operate on the world itself but on their subjective internal models of it, shaped through sensory perception and experience. Despite its popularity in coaching, self-help, and communication training, NLP has faced widespread academic criticism. Many researchers argue that its methods lack empirical validation and scientific rigor, and it is often labeled a pseudoscience. Nevertheless, practitioners report its usefulness in various applied contexts, such as public speaking, conflict resolution, and therapeutic change, where its tools for accessing and modifying internal experience can yield practical benefits. Phenomenology, by contrast, is a philosophical and methodological tradition concerned with the careful description of lived experience. Originating with Edmund Husserl and developed by thinkers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, phenomenology aims to reveal the structures of consciousness and how individuals make sense of their world. Through techniques such as bracketing (setting aside assumptions) and detailed first-person narrative, phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of phenomena as experienced from the subject's point of view. It has become a key approach in qualitative research across psychology, education, sociology, and healthcare. Psychophenomenology emerges where these two approaches meet. While phenomenology offers a framework for rigorously describing subjective experience, NLP brings practical tools for identifying how those experiences are constructed through sensory channels, imagery, and language. In combining these, psychophenomenology attempts to deepen the inquiry into how people experience, narrate, and potentially transform their inner lives. In qualitative interviews, for instance, psychophenomenology may employ NLP strategies such as eliciting sensory-based language (visual, auditory, kinesthetics) or modeling internal representations to help participants more

[49] Tosey, P. and Mathison, J. (2010). Exploring inner landscapes through psychophenomenology. Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 5(1), pp.63–82. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641011042035.

vividly articulate their lived experience. This creates more detailed and textured accounts of personal reality, enhancing the descriptive power of phenomenological analysis. The goal is not to replace phenomenology with NLP but to enrich it through practical tools that illuminate how experiences are formed and organised in consciousness. In therapeutic contexts, this integration becomes particularly relevant. NLP techniques can be used to identify maladaptive cognitive patterns, while phenomenological inquiry allows clients to explore and reflect on the meaning of those patterns in their life-world. Together, they create space for awareness, change, and personal insight. In summary, psychophenomenology offers a hybrid approach that draws on the strengths of both phenomenology and NLP. While remaining aware of the scientific limitations and criticisms of NLP, this synthesis leverages its focus on sensory and linguistic structuring of experience to enhance phenomenological research and practice. By combining methodological rigor with experiential insight, psychophenomenology holds potential as both a qualitative research method and a therapeutic framework for exploring the intricacies of human thought, language, and consciousness.

Psychophenomenological inquiry

Psychophenomenology is a contemporary methodological innovation that combines phenomenological inquiry with tools and principles derived from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Developed primarily by Pierre Vermersch[50], psychophenomenology builds on the philosophical foundation of phenomenology, especially Husserl's focus on lived experience, but moves toward more practical and structured approaches to eliciting first-person accounts. It offers refined methods for exploring the subtleties of subjective awareness, placing particular emphasis on language, introspection, and embodiment. At the heart of psychophenomenology is the 'explicitation interview', a structured, participatory form of guided introspection designed to help individuals access detailed descriptions of conscious experience. Unlike traditional phenomenological interviews, which often rely on unstructured narrative, the explicitation interview draws on distinctions in syntax, sensory representation, and mental imagery. These elements, adapted from NLP, enhance the precision of data collection and the clarity of introspective reporting. By focusing on how individuals internally organise and articulate experience, psychophenomenology addresses longstanding concerns in cognitive science and psychology regarding the validity and utility of introspective data. The contribution of NLP to this method is significant. Although often regarded as controversial or pseudoscientific in therapeutic contexts, NLP offers useful linguistic and cognitive tools for exploring how people construct meaning. Developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, NLP is based on the premise that language patterns mirror mental structures. In psychophenomenology, this insight is applied to research interviews, where syntactical forms are used to guide attention, elicit detailed recollections, and bracket researcher assumptions. Understanding the epistemological function of language structures enables researchers to access the procedural knowledge embedded in lived experience—what Vermersch calls 'the inner landscape'. Psychophenomenology also reclaims introspection as a legitimate mode of inquiry. For much of the 20th century, mainstream psychology dismissed introspection as unreliable and unscientific. Yet Vermersch, along with thinkers like Varela, Depraz, and Petitmengin, argues that systematic introspection—guided by methodological rigor and linguistic awareness—can yield rich, nuanced data about consciousness. This approach is not simply about collecting more information, but about achieving greater 'granularity': the ability to make finer distinctions within lived experience, revealing micro-processes and subtle transitions often lost in standard

[50] Vermersch, P. 2004, "Prendre en compte la phénomenalité: propositions pour une psychophenomenologie", Expliciter no. 57 (December), pp. 35-46.

narrative accounts. Importantly, psychophenomenology remains faithful to the core phenomenological commitment to subjectivity and first-person understanding. However, it insists that precision in capturing this subjectivity depends on a sophisticated awareness of how language shapes thought. Here, NLP's contribution is not ideological but technical: its tools help operationalise introspective inquiry without overriding the participant's own framing of experience. The researcher's role becomes one of skilled guidance—helping interviewees access their own tacit knowledge through structured, reflective questioning. Psychophenomenology represents a bridge between phenomenological philosophy and applied linguistic methodology. By integrating NLP into phenomenological interviewing, it deepens the capacity to access, describe, and analyze conscious experience. As such, it offers a valuable approach for qualitative researchers, especially in fields like psychology, education, organisational studies, and consciousness research, where the texture of lived experience remains central to understanding human behaviour and development.

Enabling evocation

Psychophenomenology is a method of structured introspection developed to explore first-person experience in a rigorous and detailed way. Drawing on the philosophical roots of phenomenology, particularly the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, psychophenomenology has expanded its methodological repertoire by incorporating techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). This integration has enhanced phenomenological inquiry by increasing the precision and depth with which inner experiences are accessed and described. Three key ways in which NLP contributes to psychophenomenology are: enabling evocation, using the meta-model of language, and eliciting detailed sensory representations. The first major contribution of NLP is the technique of 'enabling evocation'. In psychophenomenology, the explicitation interview does not merely ask participants to reflect on an experience but guides them to re-access it as if it were happening in the present moment. This process is facilitated through language that invites 'transderivational search'—an NLP concept describing how vague, open-ended questions lead the respondent to search internally for meaning. For instance, instead of asking 'What did you see?' the interviewer might ask, 'What do you see happening now?' This subtle shift in tense encourages participants to re-enter the memory rather than merely describe it from a distance. This re-association into experience, or what Vermersch calls 'evocation', allows participants to access vivid details, including the sensory and emotional textures of the original event. A second key NLP contribution is the 'meta-model', a typology of syntactical language patterns that reflect underlying cognitive structures. Originally developed by Bandler and Grinder, the meta-model helps interviewers identify generalisations, deletions, and distortions in a person's verbal report. By crafting questions that correspond to these patterns, researchers can probe more deeply into how experience is constructed. For example, if a participant says, 'I can't do it', the interviewer may ask, 'What's stopping you?' or 'What would happen if you tried?' Such questions reveal the internal logic and constraints shaping the person's perception. In psychophenomenology, this linguistic awareness is vital for distinguishing between raw experience and interpretive overlays, aligning with the phenomenological aim of bracketing assumptions. The third NLP-derived contribution is the systematic elicitation of 'sensory detail', including internal representations and their submodalities. In psychophenomenology, attention is given to how a person sees, hears, and feels an event internally. NLP provides a vocabulary and methodology for exploring the qualities of these inner representations—such as brightness, distance, volume, or tempo—which often shape the meaning and emotional impact of experience. This granular focus is central to Vermersch's concept of 'granularity', the ability to make fine distinctions within experience that lead to richer descriptions and deeper insight. Together, these NLP techniques

allow psychophenomenologists to ask more precise, embodied questions, access subtle shifts in awareness, and analyze transcript data with greater epistemological clarity. Importantly, psychophenomenology does not treat these recollections as literal truths but as constructions—valuable precisely because of the cognitive and affective processes they reveal. By integrating the pragmatic tools of NLP, psychophenomenology elevates introspective research into a more disciplined and effective means of understanding human consciousness.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)

Neuro-linguistic programming[51], or NLP, began in the mid-1970s as a method for improving communication and personal development. Its founders, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, claimed that language, thought, and behaviour were interconnected in ways that could be consciously adjusted to improve one's life. Drawing from the therapeutic methods of figures like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, they developed models that were intended to uncover and replicate the mental habits of highly successful people. At its core, NLP is based on 'modeling', a process where one observes and copies the thought patterns and behaviours of experts. The belief is that if someone can think like a successful person, they can also achieve similar outcomes. From this idea came two central tools: the Meta-Model and the Milton-Model. The former focuses on identifying and correcting distortions in speech to access deeper beliefs. The latter promotes hypnotic, indirect language to influence the subconscious. Despite these tools, NLP has not gained acceptance in academic psychology. Many of its foundational ideas lack empirical support. Reviews of studies have shown that NLP's methods do not consistently produce results under controlled conditions. Critics argue that its theories rest on misused or misunderstood concepts from linguistics and neuroscience. For instance, NLP borrowed heavily from the work of Noam Chomsky, but Chomsky himself was not involved in the movement and has distanced his research from it. Over time, NLP evolved into more than a therapy tool. It became a major part of the self-help and corporate training industries. Figures like Tony Robbins popularised its use in business seminars and motivational speaking. However, this commercial success brought with it a dilution of standards. Practitioners began applying NLP in inconsistent ways, often exaggerating its effects, and moving even further from its original therapeutic claims. Its claim to treat psychological and even physical conditions, sometimes in a single session, has not been substantiated by rigorous studies. Nonetheless, NLP continues to be marketed for everything from anxiety reduction to sales performance. Its appeal often lies in the simplicity of its message—change your thoughts and you can change your life. This resonates with audiences looking for quick solutions or personal transformation. Some researchers suggest that NLP functions more as a symbolic system than a scientific one. It shares characteristics with folk practices and spiritual traditions, including rituals, visualisations, and the presence of charismatic leaders. Its techniques, such as anchoring positive emotions or reframing failure, resemble ideas found in other self-help philosophies. For this reason, NLP has been described by some scholars as a form of modern-day psycho-shamanism—more belief-driven than evidence-based. In conclusion, NLP started as a model for therapeutic practice but quickly grew into a commercial enterprise. Its techniques may offer value as communication tools or motivational strategies, but they remain unsupported by solid scientific evidence. As such, NLP is best understood not as a branch of psychology, but as a cultural phenomenon shaped by optimism, marketing, and the enduring human desire for self-mastery.

[51] Bradley, E. J. and Biedermann, H.-J. (2020) 'Bandler and Grinder's Neurolinguistic Programming: Its Historical Context and Contribution', Journal of Communication Inquiry, 44(3), pp. 253–273.

Computing with words

Lotfi A. Zadeh's idea[52] of 'computing with words' represents a significant shift in how machines might process information. Rather than relying solely on numbers, this approach allows computers to operate using vague terms drawn from natural language—words like 'likely', 'far', or 'young'. People use such expressions constantly, even when making complex decisions, often without turning to exact figures. Zadeh's work aims to replicate this flexibility in artificial systems by enabling them to manipulate perceptions instead of precise measurements. Traditional computation depends on clear, numerical values. But the real world is messy. Much of human reasoning deals with things that are uncertain or poorly defined. You might describe a person as 'tall' or a chance as 'unlikely', but those terms resist exact translation into numbers. Zadeh's model accounts for this imprecision by building on fuzzy logic—a framework that allows truth to be a matter of degree, rather than all-or-nothing. In this way, computing with words offers an alternative method of reasoning when clarity is limited or when imprecision is acceptable, even helpful. The foundation of this model is what Zadeh calls the 'computational theory of perceptions'. It treats perceptions—such as distance, likelihood, or mood—as constraints that are generalised rather than rigid. These constraints are expressed through a formal language, the Generalised Constraint Language (GCL), which allows a computer to work with statements in natural language. For example, a machine might understand and act on a phrase like 'most people in Sweden are tall' by mapping it to a set of fuzzy boundaries instead of precise values. A central mechanism in this model is constraint propagation. It is the process of linking one perception-based statement to another using fuzzy rules. For instance, if you accept that 'young people tend to be energetic', and you know that 'John is young', then it is reasonable to say that 'John is likely energetic'. The strength of CW lies in this form of reasoning. It mirrors how humans think—by building approximate inferences, not exact deductions. CW also relies on the idea of fuzzy granulation. Rather than treating data as single points, it groups them into broader categories. A concept like 'middle-aged' might span many years, rather than be locked to a specific age. This makes CW particularly relevant in areas like artificial intelligence, where machines must interact with the ambiguities of human speech. Systems that use CW could better interpret instructions, infer intentions, or respond to incomplete data. While CW has been applied in areas like robotics, decision support, and natural language processing, it remains an evolving field. Its practical use is limited by challenges in efficiency and consistency, especially in large-scale applications. Still, Zadeh believes the method has the potential to shed light on consciousness itself. Since human thought is shaped by perceptions rather than only logical steps, a model that captures this fuzziness could help explain how concepts are formed, or decisions are made. Computing with words stretches the boundaries of what computation can mean. It introduces a form of logic that is less rigid, more intuitive, and closer to how people process information. As research progresses, CW may not only improve machine understanding but also offer new insights into human reasoning and the structure of thought itself.

Guide to neurolinguistics

In 'Language and the Brain A Slim Guide to Neurolinguistics[53]' Jonathan R. Brennan explores how words, sounds, meanings, and grammar are processed in the mind. Language is one of the most distinct human traits, and neurolinguistics seeks to understand how the brain

[52] Zadeh, L. A. (1996) 'Fuzzy Logic = Computing with Words', IEEE Transactions on Fuzzy Systems, 4(2), pp. 103–111.

[53] Brennan, J.R. (2022). Language and the Brain. Oxford University Press.

makes it possible. Although scientists do not yet have a full explanation, steady progress has been made using methods from linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience. Jonathan Brennan's book offers a concise introduction to this growing field, presenting current knowledge about how language lives in the brain. The starting point is to understand what the brain is doing during language use. Researchers often divide this into three levels. First is the computational level: what is the brain trying to accomplish? Second is the algorithmic level: how is it doing this in terms of mental steps? Third is the implementational level: what are the neurons and networks doing physically? These layers help scientists trace how speech sounds become meaningful words and how sentences are built in real time. One of the major discoveries in this field came from studies of brain injury. In the 1860s, Paul Broca studied patients who lost the ability to speak fluently but could still understand language. He identified damage in a region now known as Broca's area, located in the left frontal lobe. Later, Carl Wernicke found another region, in the left temporal lobe, linked to problems with understanding language. This led to the 'classical model' of language, which proposed a division between comprehension and production. While useful, this model is now considered too simple. Today, researchers use neuroimaging tools to study language processing in real time. These include techniques like magnetoencephalography (MEG), which tracks rapid brain activity. When a person hears a word, the auditory cortex responds almost immediately. Within 150 milliseconds, the brain begins processing the sounds. By 250 milliseconds, areas like the posterior middle temporal gyrus start mapping these sounds to meaning. This progression reveals a hierarchy of processing, from sensory input to conceptual understanding. A key focus in neurolinguistics is on lexical access—the way the brain finds the right word. The debate continues over whether words are stored as wholes or in smaller units called morphemes. Some evidence supports full decomposition, where the brain breaks down words like 'restarted' into 're', 'start', and 'ed'. Other data suggests partial decomposition, especially with irregular forms like 'went' or 'geese'. It may be that both models apply in different cases. Disorders like aphasia also provide clues. People with damage to specific brain areas may struggle with word retrieval or sentence construction, even though their thoughts remain intact. These patterns show how specific networks support different aspects of language. Some individuals, for example, lose the ability to produce fluent speech while still understanding others perfectly well. Language processing is not confined to one part of the brain. It involves many regions working together in networks. These networks connect frontal and temporal areas, coordinating the demands of sound, grammar, and meaning. Brennan emphasises that the old idea of fixed 'language centres' is giving way to more dynamic views. Language is distributed and context-sensitive, shaped by both biology and experience. Neurolinguistics remains a field in motion. While much is now understood about how words and meanings are processed, big questions remain. How do different languages affect brain structure? How does prediction shape understanding? And what does it mean for a word to 'mean' something in the mind? These are the puzzles that continue to drive the science of language and the brain forward.

Neural representation of meaning

What does it mean to understand a word? This question lies at the heart of neurolinguistics. Words carry meaning, but how this meaning is stored and processed in the brain remains one of the biggest puzzles in language science. Jonathan R. Brennan explores this topic by examining how the brain represents meaning, suggesting it relies on both distributed networks and centralised hubs. The idea that meaning is spread across the brain is not new. As early as the 19th century, Carl Wernicke suggested that a word like 'bell' triggers not just one memory trace, but many—its sound, shape, use, and feel. Modern neuroscience confirms this. Studies on people with category-specific agnosia show that different types of concepts are

processed in distinct brain regions. For example, someone might lose the ability to name animals but still name tools, or vice versa. This supports the idea that meaning is organised across multiple areas, depending on the kind of knowledge involved. Research by Jeffrey Binder and colleagues found that conceptual processing activates regions in the temporal, frontal, and parietal lobes. Further work by Alexander Huth used brain scans to map how words of different meanings light up the cortex. They discovered that even closely related words—like 'mother' and 'father'—activate unique, though overlapping, areas. This points to a finely tuned semantic system that distributes meaning across the brain in a highly organised way. But distribution alone does not explain everything. There is growing evidence that the brain needs a central place to integrate these dispersed meanings. The anterior temporal lobe (ATL) is a strong candidate. Damage to this area, as seen in patients with semantic dementia, causes gradual loss of conceptual knowledge. A person might first identify a duck correctly, then just call it a 'bird', and later only 'animal', showing a breakdown in semantic precision. Studies using transcranial magnetic stimulation support this by temporarily disrupting the ATL and observing broad impairments in word meaning tasks. Bilingual studies add another layer. When people switch between languages, the ATL still activates in response to meaning, even if the word form changes. This suggests the ATL plays a language-independent role in processing concepts, acting as a kind of semantic hub that ties together meaning regardless of the language used. A major debate in the field is whether meaning is tied to the body. The embodied cognition theory says yes—that understanding action words like 'kick' activates motor regions involved in kicking. Some experiments support this, showing that motor cortex activity increases when people read such words. However, evidence from patients with movement disorders complicates this view. People with Parkinson's disease or apraxia, for instance, can still understand action words, despite having trouble moving. This suggests that motor involvement may help but is not necessary for understanding. Instead, an alternative view argues that concepts, while rooted in sensory experience, become abstracted over time. According to this grounded symbolic approach, meaning starts in the body but is eventually processed in higher-level brain systems like the ATL. In the end, the brain does not treat meaning as a single thing. It processes different types of knowledge in different places but also brings them together when needed. The study of meaning in the brain continues to evolve, combining insights from brain imaging, language disorders, and computational modeling to better understand how people know what words mean. Another trend is the move toward studying language in real-life situations. Language is more than grammar and rules—it also involves gestures, social cues, and context. Neurolinguistics is beginning to explore how the brain handles communication, not just isolated sentences. It asks how the brain turns sound into meaning, how children learn language so quickly, and why only humans seem to have full linguistic ability. Each answer leads to more questions. But in that ongoing search, it helps uncover what language reveals about the human mind.

The scientific validity of NLP

NLP has been widely marketed as a breakthrough in communication and therapy. Yet, the scientific evidence supporting it is minimal. In 'Neurolinguistic Programming: Nonsupportive Data or an Untestable Theory?[54]', Christopher F. Sharpley examines the gap between theory and proof, concluding that NLP lacks the empirical backing required for credibility in psychological practice. Sharpley reviewed fifteen studies in his 1984 paper and found no consistent support for NLP's core claims. The most fundamental of these was the idea

[54] Sharpley, C. F. (1987) 'Neurolinguistic Programming: Nonsupportive Data or an Untestable Theory?', Journal of Counseling Psychology, 34(1), pp. 103–107.

of 'preferred representational systems' (PRS), which suggests people favour certain sensory channels—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—when processing information. NLP assumes that by identifying and mirroring a person's PRS, therapists can improve communication and outcomes. However, when tested under controlled conditions, this concept did not hold up. A broader review of forty-four studies revealed a similar pattern. Only six studies supported NLP principles. Five gave mixed or unclear results. Thirty-three found no support at all. These numbers raise serious questions about the foundation of NLP, especially its core techniques like PRS identification and predicate matching. Defenders of NLP, like Einspruch and Forman, argued that researchers misunderstood the theory or failed to apply it correctly. They suggested poor training or misinterpretation of its methods led to the negative outcomes. But Sharpley pointed out a troubling implication: if a technique only works under highly specific conditions or with expert practitioners, then its value in general therapeutic practice becomes doubtful. Further issues include the reliability of PRS itself. Studies show people do not consistently demonstrate one dominant sensory mode. Eye movement, which NLP claims can reveal internal thought patterns, also shows no meaningful correlation to cognitive processing in empirical research. Moreover, predicate matching—using language that reflects a client's PRS—has not been shown to produce better therapeutic results than standard methods. Some people still report positive experiences with NLP. But these effects may not stem from the model itself. Clients who expect improvement might benefit through placebo. Therapists enthusiastic about NLP might influence outcomes simply by building stronger rapport. And many NLP techniques borrow from broader therapeutic practices already known to be effective, like reframing or mirroring. These are not exclusive to NLP. What is left is a system that feels helpful to some but does not withstand scientific testing. NLP's generalisation of its methods to all contexts, despite weak data, suggests it functions more as a psychological fad than a rigorous framework. Like certain branches of psychoanalysis, NLP has gained popularity in practice but not in peer-reviewed research. Until its supporters offer reliable, repeatable evidence, NLP remains an unverified tool. The most practical path for therapists is to use methods grounded in cognitive-behavioural or evidence-based therapy rather than rely on techniques built on unstable ground.

Psychology and manipulation

Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP, emerged in the 1970s through the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder. At first, it was framed as a therapeutic model, designed to analyze and replicate the speech and behaviour of successful psychotherapists. Over time, it moved far beyond its original scope. Today, NLP appears in sales training, self-help seminars, politics, and advertising. Some people see it as a breakthrough in understanding communication and change. Others regard it as a pseudoscientific system built more on illusion than evidence. At the heart of NLP is the idea that language and behaviour reflect and shape mental processes. By altering speech patterns or body language, one can supposedly change the way people think, feel, or act. Bandler and Grinder studied figures like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, aiming to extract and formalise their techniques. The result was a loosely structured set of methods and strategies designed to influence perception and improve personal effectiveness. One of the central features of NLP is its practical flexibility. Rather than offering a unified theory or empirical proof, NLP presents itself as a toolkit. It emphasises rapport-building, sensory awareness, and goal-oriented thinking. These techniques appeal to businesspeople, therapists, and public speakers seeking to sharpen their impact. In these settings, NLP may help improve interpersonal communication. It encourages careful observation of others' verbal and non-verbal cues and offers strategies for adjusting one's own behaviour accordingly. But NLP's promise is not without problems. Critics have repeatedly noted the lack of scientific support behind its claims. Meta-analyses and peer-reviewed studies have found little consistent

evidence that NLP techniques reliably produce the outcomes they claim. At times, its terminology borrows loosely from psychology, linguistics, and neurology, but without satisfying academic standards from any of these fields. Bandler and Grinder themselves admitted that they were more interested in results than in rigorous theory, a stance that weakens the credibility of their methods. More concerning is how NLP has become associated with manipulation. Its tools, such as mirroring body language or mimicking speech rhythms, can be used to build unconscious trust. In the wrong hands, this creates opportunities for deceit. Salespeople, political operatives, and pickup artists have all been known to use these methods to manipulate emotions or decisions. While NLP may not be inherently unethical, its focus on persuasion makes it vulnerable to abuse. This is where NLP enters the territory of dark psychology. The idea that one can subtly influence, guide, or even control another person's thoughts plays into manipulative behaviour. Tactics such as reframing, anchoring emotions to words, or creating false rapport can be used with good intent—or not. Traits linked to manipulation, such as narcissism or Machiavellianism, often surface in discussions about how NLP has been misused. Though the system is not designed for harm, its openness to interpretation allows for a wide range of applications, ethical and otherwise. In the end, NLP remains a controversial topic. It promises power over language and perception but offers limited proof of its effectiveness. Its techniques may aid communication and self-awareness, but they can also be used to deceive and control. The dual nature of NLP—its appeal to both personal growth and psychological manipulation—demands a cautious and critical approach. Whether one sees NLP as a breakthrough or a modern myth, it offers a striking insight: people can try to rewire how they think and speak. With discipline and awareness, they can use language to influence emotion, shape decisions, and, potentially, change lives. In the book 'NLP: Your Map to Happiness, Confidence and Success (2012), by Neil Shah, language isn't just how people talk—it's how they magically rewire their brains. The words people use change how they feel and act so their language shapes their reality. As the Thomas Theorem states: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. Language becomes not just a reflection of thought, but a tool for transformation. NLP offers an ultimate technique for linguistic manipulation. It gives people a way to see their minds as systems that can be adjusted. With the right words, people can create new patterns are seen as happiness and success. NLP offers not just techniques, but the comforting illusion that changing a few words can change your life. Who needs therapy when you have syntax?

Direct manipulation

In 'Direct Manipulation: A Step Beyond Programming Languages[55]' Ben Shneiderman refers to the way users can interact with computers by handling objects on the screen, rather than entering abstract commands. This design approach makes systems easier to understand and more satisfying to use. Users feel more in control when they see what they are doing and receive immediate responses. The process becomes less about remembering commands and more about engaging with tasks in real time. Ben Shneiderman highlights how direct manipulation systems use visible objects, quick feedback, and reversible actions. These elements reduce the need for typing commands and make learning faster. For example, instead of inputting lines of code to move text, a user can simply drag and drop it. Mistakes can be fixed easily, lowering anxiety and encouraging experimentation. The success of this design shows up in many areas. Display editors let people see and change a document as a whole page, making editing simpler than using older, line-by-line systems. Spreadsheets like Visicalc made calculations automatic.

[55] Shneiderman, "Direct Manipulation: A Step Beyond Programming Languages," in Computer, vol. 16, no. 8, pp. 57-69, Aug. 1983, doi: 10.1109/MC.1983.1654471.

Instead of recalculating each time a value changed, the spreadsheet did it instantly. This saved time and opened new ways of managing data. Other examples include spatial data systems that use maps and charts to help users find patterns in complex datasets. In video games, players learn the controls by doing, not by reading long instructions. Designers and engineers use direct manipulation tools in CAD programs to adjust models in real time. Early office systems like the Xerox Star and Apple Lisa made it possible to move files with a mouse, setting the stage for today's graphical user interfaces. The psychological research behind this approach also matters. Studies show that people understand and remember visual information better than abstract commands. Physical actions, like dragging or clicking, reinforce understanding. This aligns with how people naturally solve problems—by interacting with the world. Still, this method has limits. Some tasks are too complex to represent visually. Too many graphics can also make an interface confusing. And while direct manipulation is great for beginners, expert users might find it slower than using typed commands. The key challenge is to design systems that are both easy to learn and powerful for those with more experience. Direct manipulation has changed how people use technology. It brings a sense of control and clarity to digital tasks. Although it may not fit every situation, its focus on visibility and feedback has become a standard in user interface design.

4. PHILOSOPHY

4.1. Philosophy of language

(From logic to life: The quest of language philosophy)

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

'The meaning of a word is its use in the language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

The linguistic turn

The linguistic turn marked a decisive transformation in twentieth-century philosophy, effectively recasting all philosophical inquiry as an inquiry into language. What began as a methodological shift—centring on the analysis of linguistic meaning—gradually became a redefinition of philosophy's very subject matter. From metaphysics and epistemology to ethics and aesthetics, every domain was reinterpreted through the lens of language, until, by the late century, philosophy often appeared indistinguishable from linguistics, philology, or literary criticism. This turns gained prominence through the work of figures such as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, who sought to clarify thought by clarifying language. Frege's sense-reference distinction introduced the idea that meaning had a logical structure distinct from empirical content. Russell's theory of descriptions attempted to resolve puzzles by showing how seemingly meaningful expressions referred to nothing at all. Early Wittgenstein took this further in the 'Tractatus', proposing that language 'pictures' reality through logical form—a vision of philosophy as the scaffolding that supports meaningful discourse. Yet even as analytic philosophers pursued precision through formal logic, the trajectory of the linguistic turn began to splinter. Later Wittgenstein rejected the earlier ideal of a purified logical language and instead

claimed that meaning lies in use. Language was no longer a mirror of reality but a set of socially embedded habits. This shift gave rise to ordinary language philosophy, where philosophers like Austin and Strawson investigated how people perform actions—such as promising, commanding, or joking—by speaking. Language became not just a vehicle for conveying information but a tool for doing things in the world. Simultaneously, continental thinkers like Saussure emphasised the relational and differential structure of language. Meaning, on this account, does not stem from reference or intention but from systems of signs defined by their difference from others. Structuralism and poststructuralism deepened this view, culminating in Derrida's deconstruction, which argued that meaning is always deferred, never final—language devours itself in an endless play of signification. This expansion of the linguistic perspective also enveloped the philosophy of mind and cognition. Debates emerged over whether language shapes thought (as per the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) or simply reflects it. Cognitive science, drawing on these philosophical debates, examined how metaphor, naming, and categorisation influence perception and reasoning. The empirical study of language took centre stage, further displacing traditional metaphysical concerns. By the end of the twentieth century, philosophy had largely abandoned the search for eternal truths in favour of analysing how people speak, write, and mean. Philosophers became readers of texts, interpreters of discourses, and analysts of communicative patterns. The linguistic turn, once a strategy for achieving clarity, ended by redefining the philosopher as someone who writes about writing, speaks about speaking, and reads about reading. Philosophy, in turning entirely toward language, turned into the study of language itself—and, in doing so, surrendered its difference from linguistics, rhetoric, and philology. When philosophy lost its voice to philology, the thinker became a talker, and wisdom turned into words about words. At last, the philosopher became a professional reader.

Naming in philosophy

Saul Kripke's 'Naming and Necessity[56]' (1980), based on lectures delivered at Princeton in 1970, is a landmark in the philosophy of language and metaphysics, and a pivotal moment in the broader trajectory of the linguistic turn in philosophy. The linguistic turn, characterising much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, emphasised that philosophical problems could often be resolved—or reformulated—by analysing language. In this context, Kripke's work fundamentally challenged long-standing descriptivist theories of reference, and in doing so, reshaped the philosophical understanding of how language connects to the world. Rejecting descriptivism, Kripke argued that proper names do not function like disguised descriptions (as Frege, Russell, and others claimed) but rather operate as rigid designators—terms that refer to the same object in every possible world in which that object exists. This insight allowed him to demonstrate that reference is not determined by a bundle of properties but by a historical chain of communication. In this causal theory of reference, a name is linked to an object through an initial 'baptism' and is preserved through communal linguistic usage. This theory preserves reference even when the associated descriptions fail (e.g., Aristotle might not have taught Alexander the Great, but he is still 'Aristotle'). This shift away from description-based reference radically altered the terrain of the philosophy of language. Kripke's proposal of a posteriori necessities—statements that are both empirically discovered and necessarily true—undermined the long-standing assumption that all necessary truths are knowable a priori. Statements like 'Water is H_2O' or 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' are not just empirical discoveries; they are also metaphysically necessary, challenging Kantian divisions and suggesting a new relationship between semantics and metaphysics. Kripke's critique extended beyond language into the philosophy of mind. By analogising the identity claim 'heat is molecular motion' with 'pain is

[56] Kripke, S. (1980) Naming and Necessity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

C-fibers firing', he raised doubts about the metaphysical necessity of such identities. His arguments anticipated future debates in consciousness studies, particularly concerning the explanatory gap between subjective experience and physical processes. These critiques reinforced the limitations of purely physicalist accounts of the mind, while remaining grounded in linguistic analysis. Though Kripke's position remains squarely analytic, 'Naming and Necessity' represents a return to metaphysical realism within the linguistic turn. It challenged the idea that language alone could exhaust the analysis of being, thereby reopening questions about essence, necessity, and identity that had been sidelined by earlier analytic approaches. By anchoring linguistic meaning in causal and modal structures rather than descriptive content, Kripke reoriented the linguistic turn toward ontological inquiry. While initially grounded in the debates of analytic philosophy, Kripke's work also intersects with themes explored in phenomenology, particularly the emphasis on direct reference, lived meaning, and the pre-conceptual grounding of language. Thus, 'Naming and Necessity' not only critiques previous linguistic models but also signals a broader philosophical shift: the recognition that language is not merely a mirror of thought, but a medium entangled with existence itself.

Language has eight letters

In 'The Philosophy of Language[57]', A. P. Martinich explores why language has always fascinated philosophers. Language is more than a tool—it is the defining trait of being human. Some primates may learn signals or gestures, but only human language offers infinite creative expression. That capacity is what separates symbolic noise from meaningful speech. Language matters because it solves problems—and sometimes causes them. Confusion often arises from how language is structured. Martinich points out that simple sentences like 'Nothing came down the road' might trick someone into believing that 'nothing' is a thing. Or when we say, 'Justice is a virtue', we risk treating abstract concepts like physical objects. Philosophy steps in to sort these illusions out. By analysing language, one avoids taking metaphor or grammar for reality. Many philosophers also ask whether language reflects the world. For Plato, language could mirror eternal truths. Wittgenstein's early work suggested that sentences 'picture' the world's structure, like a map mimics terrain. Later thinkers challenged this. Kant and others believed language did not reflect reality itself, but rather the structure of human thought about reality. Martinich divides the study of language into three main areas: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntax deals with structure. It focuses on how words are ordered to form correct sentences. Think of it as grammar without meaning. Semantics addresses meaning itself—what words refer to, and how we judge a sentence as true or false. Pragmatics examines language in use: how tone, intention, and context shape what we mean. Philosophers also make important distinctions. There is a difference between 'using' a word (to refer to something) and 'mentioning' a word (to talk about the word itself). Saying 'Cicero was a senator' uses the word to name a person. Saying 'Cicero' has six letters' talks about the word itself. Another core idea is the distinction between object language and metalanguage. The object language is the one being studied. The metalanguage is the one used to talk about it. Without this distinction, philosophical inquiry becomes circular. Martinich also explains the difference between sentences, propositions, and statements. A sentence is just a string of words. A proposition is the meaning that a sentence expresses in a context. A statement is when a person asserts that proposition, committing to its truth. Formal systems like logic try to simplify and clarify language. They use limited vocabulary and fixed rules to avoid ambiguity. For example, in a made-up language like 'Languish', sentences follow strict patterns, and each part—names, predicates, and connectors—has a specific role. Semantics then assigns truth-values to those

[57] Martinich, A.P. (1985) The Philosophy of Language. New York: Oxford University Press.

sentences based on rules. But formal systems only go so far. Real language is messy. It involves metaphor, emotion, suggestion. Martinich reminds us that language is not just a system of rules. It is a social act, a mental faculty, and a mirror of our deepest concerns about truth, reality, and meaning.

Referential theory of meaning

Words do more than make noise or fill space. They carry meaning, point to things, express thoughts. But what exactly gives a word its meaning? In 'Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction[58]', William G. Lycan explores this mystery, beginning with one of the oldest and most intuitive ideas: that words mean what they refer to. This is the Referential Theory of Meaning. It says that names point to people or objects, and general terms refer to categories—'dog' stands for the class of all dogs. Sentences combine these terms to represent states of affairs. 'The cat sat on the mat' is meaningful because it reflects a possible situation. At first glance, this seems right. People often act as if understanding a word means knowing what it stands for. But problems appear quickly. Some words clearly do not refer to anything. Take 'Pegasus'. There is no winged horse in the real world, yet people understand the sentence, 'Pegasus was a flying horse'. Or consider a sentence like 'I saw nobody'. The word 'nobody' does not refer to a thing, but it still contributes to the sentence's meaning. Then there are functional words—'and', 'if', 'not', 'the'. They do not point to objects. They structure relationships. Yet without them, sentences lose their coherence. Meaning, it turns out, is not just about reference. Structure also matters. A string of names—'Fred Martha Irving Phyllis'—says nothing. But arrange the names into a sentence with a verb—'Phyllis loves Irving'—and suddenly there is meaning. Grammar connects the pieces, turning scattered signs into a claim about the world. This structural element is invisible in the referential view. Even when two terms refer to the same thing, they are not always interchangeable. 'Joseph Ratzinger' and 'the Pope' may point to the same person, but they do not mean the same. Their connotations differ, and they fit differently in sentences. Meaning is more than reference; it includes how words are used, what they imply, and how they function in context. So, while reference plays a role in meaning, it cannot carry the full load. The classic objections—non-existent referents, negative existentials, informative identities, and failures of substitutivity—undermine the referential theory of meaning by showing that singular terms can be meaningful even when they fail to refer, refer redundantly, or behave asymmetrically in propositional contexts. Considering these challenges, the linguistic turn in philosophy did more than shift attention to language—it redefined meaning itself as something irreducible to reference, forcing philosophers to become analysts of linguistic form, textual context, and conceptual nuance rather than seekers of direct correspondence between word and world. Philosophers have proposed alternatives. Some turn to speaker intention, others to use and function, still others to mental representation or truth-conditions. Each theory tries to capture how humans move so fluidly from sounds to sense. Philosophy must first know itself before it seeks meaning in language, for language is the mirror that hides its own maker.

Knowledge of language

What does it mean to know a language? This question stands at the heart of Noam Chomsky's 'Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use[59]'. Language is not just a tool; it is part of the human mind. Knowing a language, Chomsky argues, is not just about speaking

[58] Lycan, W.G. (2000) Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction (3rd edn., 2019). New York: Routledge.
[59] Chomsky, N. (1986) Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use. New York: Praeger.

or writing. It is about having an internal system—an unconscious mental grammar—that shapes what one can say, understand, or even imagine saying. Many earlier thinkers saw language as a reflection of thought. Leibniz called it a mirror of the mind. Others believed grammar revealed universal truths. John Stuart Mill thought grammar was tied to logic. These ideas treated language not just as communication but as an insight into cognition. Over time, though, linguistics moved away from such views. With the rise of empiricism and behaviourism, language was studied as external behaviour—sounds, symbols, or rules shared by communities. Chomsky reoriented this approach. In the 1950s, he introduced 'generative grammar, shifting attention from language as shared behaviour to language as individual knowledge. For Chomsky, language is an internal system—what he calls I-language. This system is unique to each person and shaped by an innate faculty of the mind. One does not just learn language like one learns to ride a bike. Instead, humans are born with a universal framework, which gets tuned by experience. A core argument for this view is the 'poverty of the stimulus'. Children acquire rich and complex language, even when they receive limited and often flawed input. They pick up subtle rules—like the difference between 'John is too stubborn to talk to' and 'John is too stubborn to talk to someone'—without being taught. Such rapid, uniform learning suggests the presence of an internal, universal grammar guiding the process. Chomsky distinguishes between knowledge of language and ability to use it. A person may know a language but be unable to speak due to injury or fatigue. The knowledge remains intact. This shows that language competence is deeper than performance. It lives in the structure of the mind, not just in what people say or write. Importantly, this internal grammar is not always conscious. People know that 'John ate' implies that he ate something, not a shoe, but few could explain why. Such judgments reflect mental knowledge we carry without awareness. Chomsky's theory treats these intuitions as real data, just like observations in physics or biology. This view puts linguistics firmly within cognitive science. Language becomes not just an artefact but a biological phenomenon. Understanding it helps illuminate how the mind works—how humans learn, think, and generate meaning from sound.

From realism to quietism

What is the link between language and reality? Can words truly mirror the world, or are meanings always tied to what people know and do? In 'Philosophy of Language[60]', Alexander Miller explores how these questions shape debates between realism and anti-realism. Realism begins with a simple idea: language aims to describe a world that exists independently of thought. A sentence like 'There are three chairs in the room' is true if, and only if, the room really contains three chairs. This applies not only to physical facts but also to moral ones. A realist holds that 'Murder is wrong' expresses a truth, regardless of belief or emotion. Opponents of realism offer various challenges. Non-cognitivists, like A.J. Ayer, claim that moral statements do not describe facts but express attitudes. 'Stealing is wrong', in this view, is more like saying 'Boo to stealing!' The problem arises when such statements are used in reasoning. The Frege–Geach problem shows that logical arguments require these phrases to retain consistent meaning. If they do not, moral reasoning disintegrates. Another critique comes from Michael Dummett. He argues that realism commits us to verification-transcendent truths—truths that exist even if we can never know or prove them. This idea is puzzling. How can someone understand a statement if its truth lies forever beyond their reach? Anti-realists respond with several arguments. The acquisition challenge asks how speakers could ever learn such inaccessible truths. The manifestation argument, influenced by Wittgenstein, says understanding is shown in use—not in grasping the unknowable. The rule-following problem

[60] Miller, A. (2007) Philosophy of Language. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

questions whether meaning can ever be fixed beyond judgment. If meaning depends on interpretation, then so does truth. Hilary Putnam's Twin-Earth thought experiment adds another layer. Imagine two worlds: on Earth, 'water' refers to H_2O; on Twin-Earth, it refers to XYZ, a similar but different substance. Even if people think and speak identically, their words refer to different things. This supports semantic externalism—the view that meaning depends on the environment, not just mental content. Crispin Wright expands these ideas by outlining different 'marks of realism'. Some domains, like science, might meet all of them. Others, like comedy or morality, might only meet a few. This suggests that realism is not a yes-or-no position but a scale. Quietism, however, rejects the whole debate. Drawing again on Wittgenstein, quietists argue that the search for metaphysical truth in language may be misguided. But not all philosophers agree. John McDowell defends a view of meaning that connects language with the world without abandoning its normative power. In the end, the philosophy of language reveals more than grammar or syntax. It shows how deeply truth, meaning, and understanding are entangled. Whether truth lies beyond verification or not, these debates illuminate the fragile link between words and the world.

How does it mean to say something?

Philosophy of language begins with a simple question that leads to many complex ones: what does it mean to say something? In 'The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language[61]', Steven M. Cahn and contributors explore how even this question is far from settled. The field is filled with debates—about meaning, reference, truth, and interpretation—that have divided philosophers for decades. A central issue is the nature of meaning. Words and sentences clearly carry meaning, but what is that meaning? Is it just what they refer to in the world? That is one idea, but it quickly runs into problems. A single sentence can mean different things depending on context. Think of irony, suggestion, or ambiguity. This leads philosophers to distinguish between semantics (literal meaning) and pragmatics (contextual or implied meaning). But the border between the two is not clear. Another foundational issue is methodology. Should philosophy of language be purely conceptual and analytic, or should it be part of science? Some philosophers argue for a purely a priori approach, relying on logical reasoning and intuitions. Others think meanings should be studied empirically, using tools from psychology and cognitive science. Neither side has fully won this argument. In practice, many philosophers now move between the two. Intuition also plays a key role. Philosophers often test their theories using thought experiments, asking what people would say or believe in unusual situations. Are these reliable sources of insight or just reflections of cultural bias? Again, opinions differ. Some see intuitions as evidence, others see them as suspect. The relationship between language and thought is another deep puzzle. Do we think first and then put thoughts into words? Or does language shape the way we think? Some, like Paul Grice, say thought comes first. Others, like Michael Dummett, argue that language is prior, or at least co-equal. If language is necessary for thought, then our ability to think might depend on the language we speak. Then there is the question of what it means to 'know' a language. Most people can use their language without being able to explain its rules. So, what kind of knowledge is that? Philosophers call it tacit knowledge—an understanding we have but cannot always describe. Some argue it is a skill, like riding a bike. Others say it is more like knowing a fact, even if we cannot articulate it. Competing theories try to explain how language works. The Gricean approach says meaning comes from the speaker's intentions. Davidsonians focus on truth conditions—what would have to be true for a sentence to be correct. These views compete with use-based theories, which say meaning comes from how words are used in conversation. Finally, major challenges like

[61] Cahn, S.M. (ed.) (2003) The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language. Oxford: Blackwell.

vagueness and meaning scepticism still haunt the field. How many grains of sand make a heap? When does red become orange? Questions like these show how difficult it is to define meaning precisely. Some philosophers even wonder whether words have fixed meanings at all. The philosophy of language is not a settled discipline. It is a site of ongoing struggle—between logic and usage, intuition and science, simplicity, and ambiguity. It asks what words are, what they do, and how they shape the human experience. How does it mean to say something?

4.2. Theory of language

(The architecture of meaning: Language as structure, life, and sign)

'Language is form, not substance'.

— Louis Hjelmslev, Prolegomena to a Theory of Language

'A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas'.

— Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics

Final perspective of language

Linguistic theory began as a narrow, technical approach. It focused on describing small samples of natural language. But this limited view could not last. Step by step, and with inner necessity, it gave way to something broader. What started as a method for analysing grammar became a gateway to understanding the totality of human expression. Each speech act demands integration. It cannot be viewed in isolation. Even the smallest utterance leads outward, pointing to other systems and usages. A dialect or a writing style is not closed; it exists in a web of connections. These links—social, historical, stylistic—must be considered. As analysis expands, so does the scope of the theory. What once seemed like isolated phenomena turn out to be parts of a larger, interrelated field. No single language can be studied on its own. Each belongs to a class, a family. These linguistic types reflect and define one another. A language is what it is because of how it differs from others. Functional identity is relational. Theory must include this interplay. It maps a system of languages, structured by internal types and shaped by historical contact, genetic lineage, and borrowing. Further reflection pushes theory beyond language into semiotics. What was once excluded—gesture, symbols, other sign systems—must now be included. Semiotics absorbs non-semiotics. Everything becomes readable. Nothing stands fully outside of signification. Linguistic theory grows into a universal interpretive tool. It shines light on all domains of knowledge. This shift did not betray the early goals of theory. On the contrary, it fulfilled them. By focusing on immanence—on form, system, and internal relation—the theory discovered something more powerful. It revealed language as the basis for transcendence. The narrow view opened to a wider horizon. Through structure, one reaches significance. Language, in this light, is more than a tool. It is the medium of thought, the trace of culture, and the mirror of being. Theory, at its most abstract, touches on life itself. It no longer deals only with texts but with the human condition. Linguistic structure becomes the starting point for philosophy, art, and science. In this expanded form, theory meets its final purpose. It recognises not just grammar, but the speaker. Not just the system, but the community. It accounts for use, variation, context, and meaning. In doing so, it approaches a

total understanding. A silent understanding between neighbours, between people living together. The language ends where it started.

Prolegomena to a theory

Louis Hjelmslev begins 'Prolegomena to a Theory of Language[62]' with a striking claim: language is not simply a means of communication, but the central structure that holds human life together. It mediates thought, emotion, memory, and action. Before consciousness itself, language is already present—surrounding the newborn, shaping its first perceptions. It offers companionship in solitude, and forms the invisible thread linking individuals to communities, cultures, and history. More than a tool, language becomes an inner monologue, a conscience, and even a source of identity. Hjelmslev asks whether language reflects life, or if it is the very seed from which life grows. The scientific study of language, however, has often neglected its autonomy. Language is usually reduced to its physical or psychological correlates—sound waves, gestures, brain states. Linguistics becomes a servant to other sciences, a way to understand thought, culture, or history. Hjelmslev's call is different: language must be studied. It is not just a function of the body or mind, but a self-contained structure with its own principles. A theory of language must begin by treating language as autonomous—free from reduction, yet fully capable of revealing insights about the human condition. To build such a theory, one must identify the constancy beneath the fluctuations of speech. This is not to deny variation, but to look for structure within it. The theory must describe language in a way that holds across all its forms—spoken, written, signed, or coded. It must also remain valid for all conceivable languages, not just those currently spoken. The aim is a method, simple yet complete, for describing any linguistic expression. For this, the theory cannot rely on historical accidents, individual psychology, or sociological trends. It must be deductive, systematic, and general. Such a theory faces resistance from the humanities, where uniqueness and particularity often overshadow structure and regularity. But Hjelmslev insists that a system lies beneath the surface. Even art, literature, and style can be analysed through linguistic functions, forms, and rules. What is needed is not to flatten difference, but to understand the systems that give rise to difference in the first place. This theoretical model does not ignore reality. It is not mere abstraction. Rather, it begins with empirical observations—texts, utterances, signs—but seeks to explain them through formal structure. The theory is arbitrary in its principles, but valid in its application. It does not describe experience directly but creates a framework within which experience can be described. This is its strength: it brings order to diversity. Hjelmslev's vision extends beyond language narrowly defined. By separating form from substance, he shows that the same linguistic structure can manifest in sound, writing, gesture, or symbols. Even non-verbal systems—flag codes, sign languages, formal logic—may follow linguistic rules. In this way, his theory becomes a general semiotics. Connotative and metasemiotic layers allow it to analyze not only what is said, but how meaning systems reference one another. A text, for example, can contain many semiotic layers, each embedded in others. Ultimately, this vision leads toward universality. Every language, dialect, and code become a case within a larger system. Languages do not stand alone. They are interconnected through borrowings, structures, and relations. No speech act is isolated; every utterance is a node in a web of form and function. Language theory, by following its internal logic, eventually returns to the human. From its strict immanence arises a new foundation for transcendence. It does not oppose life—it clarifies it. Language is no longer merely a mirror. It becomes a method of inquiry into the world itself,

[62] Hjelmslev, L. (1961) Prolegomena to a Theory of Language. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

offering not only expression but understanding. The goal is not simply to describe language, but to recognise in it how all understanding begins.

Language and non-language

In traditional linguistics, the focus remains tightly fixed on 'natural' language. Speech and writing are treated as the primary forms of linguistic expression. But this perspective is too narrow. According to Louis Hjelmslev, linguistic theory must eventually move beyond this initial boundary. The shift is not optional—it is demanded by the internal logic of the theory itself. Once language is understood not as a set of sounds but as a form independent of substance, the theory expands toward other sign systems. This expansion was implicit from the beginning. As soon as one treats form and content as separate, it becomes clear that linguistic form can manifest in many kinds of substance. Language is not just sound and gesture. It can also take the form of writing, flags, or hand signs. These are not secondary or artificial modes. They express the same linguistic form as speech and must be included in any complete theory. This undermines the idea that sound is the 'natural' mode of language. Linguistic theory reveals that substance—sound, gesture, writing—is arbitrary. What matters is the form behind the substance. Two common objections arise. First, that non-speech forms are derived from speech and therefore less fundamental. But even if they are derived, they express the same structure. In some cases, like alphabetic writing, the form may be even more precise. Second, that changing the substance alters the form. But this is only true when substance and form are confused. A phonetic change or a semantic shift might alter meaning, but the underlying linguistic system can stay intact. Form is stable. Substance is variable. In this view, form is an abstract algebraic structure. It has no inherent substance. It can be expressed in multiple ways. The task of linguistic theory is to describe this structure—to build a general calculus of language. This framework should be able to account for any linguistic type, regardless of how it is manifested. The goal is not to describe a particular language, but to define a theory that can apply to all languages, even those not yet known. This leads naturally to a broader semiotic field. Denotative semiotics deal with signs whose expression and content are not themselves semiotic systems. But often, one or both planes are semiotic. If the expression is a semiotic, we call it connotative. If the content is, we call it metasemiotic. This layered structure shows that texts are rarely simple. They often include components from multiple systems—linguistic, social, political. Recognising this complexity is essential to understanding how meaning is constructed. The theory still holds to its core principles—form, function, and structure—but now it engages with new domains. Linguistics becomes semiotics. The study of language becomes the study of sign systems more generally. What began as a narrow analysis of speech becomes a method for understanding all forms of communication.

Semiotic theory of language

Sebastian Shaumyan's 'A Semiotic Theory of Language[63]' shifts the focus of linguistics away from purely structural or generative models. He argues that language must be understood as a system of signs—deeply tied to human consciousness, society, and cognition. This means language is not only about sound and grammar, but about meaning shaped by culture and interaction. It is a human creation, yet once created, it functions independently, forming what Shaumyan calls a semiotic world. Unlike generative linguistics, which builds language from abstract rules and transformations, semiotic theory starts from function. Language is used to communicate, so any analysis must ask: what signs are people using, and what meanings do those signs carry? That is the real basis of language. Phonemes and words do not just exist—

[63] Shaumyan, S. (1987) A Semiotic Theory of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

they do something. They act as signs in a complex code that people learn through culture and use. Shaumyan identifies key features that define natural language. First, language works through sequencing: people combine limited phonemes to create vast vocabularies. But these combinations are not random. Grammar introduces rules that reduce errors and enhance clarity. Structure also matters. Language works on levels—sounds, morphemes, sentences—all layered in a hierarchy. This layered structure helps explain how people can produce and understand endlessly varied expressions. Another central idea is semiotic relevance. Only distinctions that matter for communication—differences that carry meaning—are linguistically relevant. This helps explain why different languages carve up reality in different ways. For example, some have dozens of words for snow, others just one. These differences reflect what each culture finds important, not arbitrary variation. This is the heart of linguistic relativity—language shapes how people see the world. Shaumyan also stresses that linguistics is just one branch of semiotics. Human languages are 'very large systems', capable of infinite expression. This sets them apart from artificial sign systems like logic or programming languages. Still, natural languages share a linguistic genotype—an underlying structure present in all human tongues. Studying this helps identify universal features of language. Unlike formal theories that treat language like a machine, semiotic theory is more flexible. It focuses on synchronic analysis (how language works now) but still values diachronic study (how language changes). Both are necessary. Languages evolve, but they must function at any given moment for communication to succeed. Shaumyan critiques generative grammar for ignoring the semiotic nature of language. Rules alone do not capture what language means or how it is used. Generativist models, he argues, confuse logical possibility with human practice. They build deep structures and transformations that may be elegant but do not reflect how people speak or think. In contrast, semiotic theory centres language in human life. It sees it as a living, changing system of meaning. This approach does not reduce speech to formulas. Instead, it respects the full complexity of how people create, learn, and use signs to understand one another.

Translation and interpretation

Translation and interpretation sit at the heart of philosophical reflection on language, meaning, and understanding. These processes are not merely about converting words from one language to another—they raise deep questions about the limits of meaning, the nature of communication, and whether language can ever fully capture thought. In his 1960 book 'Word and Object', W\.V. Quine challenged assumptions about translation by proposing the idea of radical translation. He asked: what would it take to translate an entirely unknown language, from scratch, using only observation of speakers' behaviour and the physical context in which they speak? Quine imagines a linguist encountering an unfamiliar language and hearing the word 'gavagai' shouted when a rabbit scurries past. Does this word refer to the whole rabbit, a rabbit part like its tail, or even a fleeting temporal stage of 'rabbitness'? Without knowing the internal conceptual structure of the speaker's mind, the translator can only guess. Multiple translation manuals could explain the observed behaviour equally well yet contradict each other about what the word really means. Quine concluded that reference is fundamentally indeterminate, and thus there is no objective fact about what a given word 'really' refers to. This became the foundation for his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation and launched a new phase of semantic scepticism. Building on this idea, Donald Davidson introduced the concept of radical interpretation[64]. Unlike Quine's encounter with an alien language, Davidson explored how one interprets the speech and actions of others within the same linguistic community. His

[64] Davidson, D. (1973). Radical Interpretation. Dialectica, 27(3/4), 313–328. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42968535

insight was that understanding even a familiar language involves attributing meaning not just to words or sentences in isolation, but to a whole network of beliefs, desires, and attitudes. Interpretation, for Davidson, depends on identifying patterns of coherence among a speaker's statements, as well as between those statements and the surrounding world. Understanding, then, is not a matter of decoding fixed meanings, but of constructing a framework where the speaker's utterances and worldview make sense together. These theories share a commitment to semantic holism, the idea that meaning depends on the whole system of language and thought rather than isolated terms. One cannot interpret a single sentence without reference to a broader context of usage, intention, and belief. This has implications for everything from translation software to political rhetoric: meaning is never neutral, and understanding is always partial and interpretative. Another major philosophical issue related to interpretation is vagueness. Words like 'tall', or 'heap' resist strict boundaries. The Sorites paradox famously illustrates how the gradual removal of grains from a heap seems never to eliminate the 'heap', yet clearly a single grain is not one. Classical logic struggles with these grey areas. To address this, philosophers and logicians have proposed alternative systems—such as fuzzy logic or three-valued logics—that allow for intermediate truth values. These systems mirror the ambiguity found in natural language more accurately than binary logic. Together, the problems of translation, interpretation, and vagueness show that language is not a mirror of reality but a tool for navigating it—imprecise, flexible, and deeply embedded in human experience.

Mind, reason and imagination

Understanding language depends not only on knowing the words but also on interpreting how people use them. The act of translation—whether between languages, cultures, or even between minds—raises profound questions about meaning, context, and the human capacity to share thoughts. In 'Mind, Reason, and Imagination[65]', a collection of essays from the Cambridge Studies in Philosophy series, these questions are approached not just through formal logic, but by exploring the imaginative and rational capacities that make communication possible. Traditional philosophy of language has often treated psychological concepts as if they functioned like the concepts of natural science—predictable, objective, and easily codified. But this view overlooks the subtle, dialogical nature of how humans engage with one another. People are not merely systems to be decoded. They are interlocutors—agents whose mental states we infer, not calculate. The challenge of interpretation lies in this relational complexity. One of the core questions explored is: how do humans arrive at judgments about what others think? Some cognitive theories, like the so-called 'Theory Theory (TT)', claim that people use a kind of internalised folk psychology—a mini-scientific theory—to predict behaviour. But this model assumes a level of computational sophistication that real-life thinking rarely demonstrates. Instead, a more human approach emerges from what is called simulation theory: we understand others by imaginatively putting ourselves in their shoes, projecting our own rationality into theirs. This is less a science than a habit, shaped by empathy, shared norms, and lived experience. Interpretation also requires attention to context and indexicality—those aspects of language that refer not to stable definitions but to changing conditions. When someone says, 'I feel this way', or points while saying, 'like this', the meaning relies on shared presence and perspective. Such expressions depend on indexical predication, a term explored in the book to describe how we refer not to fixed entities but to properties demonstrated in

[65] Heal, J. (2003). Mind, reason, and imagination : selected essays in philosophy of mind and language. Cambridge: University Press.

context. This has direct implications for translation, especially across cultural or linguistic divides, where such gestures and tacit understandings cannot be easily transferred. Indirect discourse further complicates things. When one reports another's speech—'She said that the Earth moves'—there is no one-to-one mapping from original utterance to report. The sentence must shift grammatical and temporal cues, adjusting to new contexts and speakers. Here again, interpretation hinges not just on lexical accuracy but on shared imagination and rational inference. The essays suggest that understanding others is not a matter of discovering psychological facts but recognising persons as rational beings. This view reintroduces a humanistic dimension into philosophy of language, resisting the temptation to reduce people to data points or behaviour patterns. Language, on this view, is not only a tool for conveying information but also for creating shared meaning. It works not just through reference but through imagination, empathy, and dialogue.

Language and reality

Language shapes how people perceive the world. It connects thought to action, private experience to public exchange. In their book 'Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language[66]', Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny explore how language functions, what meaning is, and how closely language aligns with the physical world. Their approach challenges the belief that language holds a privileged place in philosophy. While acknowledging its importance, they argue for a naturalistic and empirical view of linguistic theory. Language is not simply a reflection of the world. It is also a tool. People use it to inform, command, joke, insult, or express inner thoughts. But what allows language to be so flexible? Human language differs from animal signalling because it is abstract, arbitrary, and productive. It is not bound by immediate stimuli. It operates across media—spoken, written, or signed. Its strength lies in its ability to generate endless combinations from finite elements. These features make language powerful but also difficult to define. The main question, then, is: what gives words their meaning? Philosophers once believed language could solve deep metaphysical puzzles. Some even thought that by analysing meaning, one could answer ethical or epistemological problems. Devitt and Sterelny push back. They argue that meaning should not be treated as a mystical or purely philosophical concept. Instead, linguistic meaning, like all natural phenomena, should be explained using physicalist and empirical methods. Philosophy of language, according to the authors, must not drift into speculation detached from science. Instead, it must align with theories in biology, psychology, and neuroscience. Language evolved. Its use depends on the cognitive structures of the human brain. Understanding language means understanding these structures and their functions. The authors make an important distinction between the problem of meaning and the problem of understanding. One concerns how symbols refer to things. The other deals with what it means to be competent in a language. These are separate questions, even if they are related. Linguistic theories must address both: what signs mean, and how people come to grasp them. The book also criticises certain philosophical tendencies, such as the reliance on the 'principle of charity'. Some thinkers, like Davidson or Dennett, argue that when interpreting speech, we must assume most beliefs are true or rational. Devitt and Sterelny reject this. They believe it adds unnecessary metaphysical weight. In science, false beliefs are normal. Understanding a system means accounting for both truth and error. Language is not outside the natural world. It is part of it. Devitt and Sterelny argue for a view where linguistic facts—about meaning, reference, truth—must be explained in natural terms. If those explanations fail, the concepts should be dropped from theory.

[66] Devitt, M. and Sterelny, K. (1999) Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Philosophy, they argue, must not elevate language above the physical world. Instead, it must show how language fits into it.

The home of language

Martin Heidegger saw language not merely as a tool but as the ground of human existence. In 'Being and Time', and more explicitly in his later writings, Heidegger reoriented philosophical attention away from the instrumental view of speech and toward what he called 'saying' — the revealing of Being through language. Joseph Kockelmans, in 'On Heidegger and Language[67]', explores this transformation, stressing that for Heidegger, humans do not simply speak language — they belong to it. Humans do not invent language to communicate pre-existing ideas; rather, it is the space in which beings appear and meaning emerges. In contrast to classical views—where language functions to represent inner thoughts or external objects—Heidegger's perspective insists that language is the very event through which world and meaning come into view. Language, in its deepest sense, is not speech, writing, or symbolic systems. It is logos, the originary gathering and revealing that lets beings be seen. This insight challenges centuries of metaphysical assumptions, from Aristotle's notion of speech as signification to modern structuralism's fixation on language as code. For Heidegger, the problem lies in the forgetfulness of Being that occurs when language is reduced to utility. In everyday speech, humans often repeat phrases, clichés, and inherited concepts without listening to what language itself says. Kockelmans draws attention to this point, showing how Heidegger redefines 'saying' as the primordial act that lets things appear. Language is a kind of clearing—Lichtung—a space where the world discloses itself. In this clearing, humans do not impose meaning, but receive it, respond to it, and let it resonate. This understanding demands a different kind of listening. Speaking is grounded in hearing—an openness to what language allows to show itself. Heidegger describes this as listening not to what is said, but to the saying of it. Authentic speech, then, is not chatter but an attuned responsiveness to the world's disclosure. When one speaks authentically, one does not manipulate language but lets language speak. This distinction between 'speaking' and 'saying' is crucial. One can speak endlessly without saying anything. True saying brings forth meaning by pointing, revealing, and letting-be. Heidegger's critique of modern language use is not nostalgic. He does not call for a return to myth or poetry alone, though he finds in poets like Hölderlin a model of language that listens deeply. Rather, he aims to recover a pre-conceptual relationship to Being, a kind of original thinking that precedes representation and calculation. Language, in this view, is not about grasping or mastering the world but dwelling in it. Kockelmans shows that for Heidegger, the essence of language lies in its granting—its capacity to bring forth beings into presence without enclosing them in rigid concepts. Language is not a mirror but a horizon. It does not produce the world but lets it emerge. To speak, then, is to dwell—to participate in the ongoing revelation of Being through language that speaks through us. Language is not a system humans use, but a home they inhabit. It speaks to us, even as we try to speak it.

Language of modernity

In 'Voices of Modernity[68]', Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs uncover how ideas about language helped construct the very concept of modernity. They argue that language was not simply shaped by modern institutions—it helped build them. From philosophy to science,

[67] Kockelmans, J.J. (1980) On Heidegger and Language, Northwestern University Press.

[68] Bauman, R. and Briggs, C.L. (2003). Voices of modernity : language ideologies and the politics of inequality. Cambridge, England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

from colonial governance to educational reform, linguistic ideologies became tools for structuring who could speak, who should listen, and whose voices were dismissed as irrational, emotional, or primitive. The book begins with the Enlightenment, when figures like John Locke redefined language as a transparent medium of reason. For Locke, speech was valuable only if it could convey clear, rational ideas. He championed linguistic clarity, treating precision as a marker of truth and modern thinking. But this ideal was far from neutral. It excluded those who did not—or could not—speak in this purified manner. The poor, women, colonised people, and oral communities were judged as lacking modern consciousness because of the way they spoke. The ideology of linguistic purity justified systems of social exclusion. Language became a gatekeeper. If someone's speech did not conform to the standards of clarity, order, and reason, their ideas were dismissed. These norms were not just about grammar or pronunciation. They were about authority and trust. Who gets to define knowledge? Who gets to represent the world? Print culture reinforced this. The shift from orality to literacy was not just technical; it was political. Writing, especially printed writing, was linked to truth, objectivity, and permanence. Oral traditions, in contrast, were seen as unstable, emotional, and prone to error. This distinction helped reinforce social hierarchies between those aligned with written culture and those tied to spoken traditions. Modernity did not erase local, embodied, and affective forms of communication. It repressed and reclassified them. Language was divided and ranked. Standardised languages were seen as legitimate; dialects were seen as backward. Vernacular speech became a marker of moral, cultural, and racial difference. This sorting mechanism was central to colonial administration, national education, and even scientific discourse. But modernity's own practices of speech were not as pure as they claimed. The language of reason, science, and law was also shaped by rhetoric, performance, and power. Enlightenment thinkers pretended to purify language of its messy, contextual roots. In doing so, they created a paradox. They promoted speech as universal but built it on exclusion. They declared language transparent, while using it to obscure the systems of inequality it helped produce. This contradiction still shapes the present. From media discourse to academic writing, dominant voices often speak in the idiom of neutrality and reason, while silencing alternative ways of knowing. Modernity's emphasis on clarity, rationality, and standardised speech reveals language not as a neutral medium, but as a structured system of exclusion—privileging certain voices while silencing others. This tendency supports a theory of language as inherently hierarchical, where absolute freedom of speech becomes paradoxical. Unrestricted expression could undermine the very coherence of a linguistic community, eroding the shared norms that make communication, mutual recognition, and social meaning possible. When every tongue speaks without limit, the voice of the community is the first to fall silent.

Illusion of universality

Locke's redefinition of language was more than a philosophical exercise. It was a foundational act in shaping modernity's illusion of neutrality and universality. In the chapter 'Language, Modernity, and the Illusion of Universality', Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs trace how language was purified—detached from its social contexts and repackaged as abstract, rational, and universal. This purification project obscured the cultural biases embedded in modernist thought and helped normalise new forms of exclusion. What Locke did was to turn language into a measuring tool. Precision in speech became a sign of education, order, and legitimacy. The result was a split: expressive or poetic uses of language were marked as irrational, backward, or folkloric, while standard, rational speech became the mark of a modern subject. Locke's purified language stripped away context, metaphor, and ambiguity—traits often associated with women, colonised peoples, or the poor. Language was now a gatekeeper, not just a tool. This is where hybridisation entered. Even as Locke and others promoted purified

speech, the very process of universalising it created new mixtures. Herder, for example, gave value to folk speech and tradition, yet framed them as artefacts of the past—worthy of study, but not of participation in modern governance. This contradiction remains. Modernity both praises and marginalises the folk. It celebrates 'cultural diversity' while imposing a strict standard of what counts as valid language. Hybrid traditions become museum pieces, not living practices. Language, then, becomes both weapon and decoration. In education, policy, and media, purified language still holds sway. It appears to be universal, but this is illusion—an illusion created through centuries of ideological labour. Bauman and Briggs show how purification is always paired with a logic of exclusion. Those who do not speak 'correctly' are framed as irrational or politically suspect. The debates around Ebonics in 1990s America show this clearly. When African American English was recognised as a distinct linguistic system, it provoked backlash—not because it was not valid, but because it disrupted the fiction of a single, neutral standard. Critics feared disorder, even though the real threat was to a system that masks inequality as common sense. This legacy continues in the global stage. International agencies like UNESCO celebrate traditional speech while also regulating it, often turning it into a static object. The idea of safeguarding culture sounds inclusive, but it depends on the same purified frame that shaped early modern ideologies. 'Tradition' is frozen and rebranded. It is allowed to survive only under expert supervision. This is not preservation—it is containment. To move beyond this, Bauman and Briggs argue for a reflexive approach. Language is never neutral. It is never outside of politics. The point is not to return to pure or authentic forms but to uncover the processes that make language seem pure in the first place. Understanding purification and hybridisation as coexisting strategies allows for more honest critique. The goal is not to reject modernity wholesale, but to recognise the power dynamics embedded in its linguistic foundations. This means treating tradition not as a relic, but as a living and contested space—one that can still resist dominant narratives. If purified language remains the hidden standard, inequality will continue to wear the mask of clarity and reason.

4.3. Meaning of language

(The fragility of meaning: Language between mind and world)

'Words are like leaves; and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found'.

— Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism

'Meaning is not something behind the utterance; it is the use to which the utterance is put'.

— J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words

Questions that refuse to go away

In 'What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy[69]', Thomas Nagel sets aside the technical debates and historical footnotes often found in philosophy texts and goes straight to the root of human curiosity: Why are we here? How can we know anything? What can we hope for if anything at all? His slim volume is not a roadmap to final answers, but an invitation to sit with uncertainty, to think seriously about questions that children ask and

[69] Nagel, T. (1987). What Does It All Mean? Oxford University Press.

adults tend to ignore. Nagel does not treat philosophy as a discipline with settled foundations, but as a way of living with and reflecting on persistent doubt. He opens by asking how one can be sure of the world beyond personal experience. The familiar table, the floor under one's feet—how do we know they exist independently of our senses? Scepticism is not solved here, only made vivid. One might dismiss it as mere abstraction, yet it remains troubling: what if one's grasp of reality is always filtered, always partial? The same style of careful questioning recurs when Nagel turns to other people. How can you be sure that others have inner lives like your own? Expressions, words, gestures—these are clues, but none are guarantees. It is not just a problem of information; it is a problem of being human in relation to other humans. If your inner world is incommunicable in its entirety, what makes you trust anyone else has one at all? This leads into the mind-body problem. Is the mind just another physical phenomenon—neurons firing—or something fundamentally different? Nagel lays out both materialist and dualist positions but lets the problem remain open. His reluctance to settle reflects a deeper commitment to living with contradiction and complexity. The issue of meaning in language gets similar treatment. Words connect to ideas, but how? Is there a stable bridge between language and thought, or is it all a construct that we have collectively agreed to pretend works? Free will is another such knot: people feel free, yet their actions seem determined by biology, history, and cause-and-effect. Is moral responsibility possible under such constraints? Morality, too, is on unstable ground. Nagel questions whether right and wrong are objective features of the world or products of culture and emotion. Justice comes next—what does fairness mean when resources, ability, and opportunity are so unevenly distributed? Can one defend equality without ignoring difference? Death and the meaning of life round out the inquiry. Rather than comfort the reader, Nagel highlights the absurdity of life's brevity and the strange fact of consciousness in the face of eventual extinction. But instead of despair, he encourages thoughtful reflection. What gives the book its strength is not the answers but the integrity of the questions. Nagel shows that philosophy does not need to resolve the human condition to make it more intelligible. It is enough to sit with the unresolvable and ask, again and again, what does it all mean?

Morality as evolutionary illusion

In 'The Myth of Morality[70]', Richard Joyce argues that moral thinking is not what it seems. People treat moral rules as objective truths—unbreakable, universal, and real. But according to Joyce, this certainty is an illusion. Morality did not come from logic or divine command. It evolved. It helped humans survive. And like many evolutionary tools, it does not need to be true to be useful. Morality likely began in families. Evolution favoured helping close kin, because helping relatives helps genes spread. You do not need a reason to feed your child—you just do it. But instinct alone was not enough. Desires can fail under stress. So, evolution added pressure. It created a sense of duty. A built-in 'ought'. This internal push made sure people helped even when it was hard. Over time, this system expanded. Morality moved beyond blood. Reciprocal altruism—helping non-relatives in return for future help—became a winning strategy. Tribes that cooperated more outperformed those that did not. But cooperation needed rules. Trust mattered. Groups began to punish cheaters and praise the fair. A sense of justice took root. Even some primates show this—chimpanzees respond to fairness and punishment. These emotions formed the foundation of what later became moral systems. One feature of morality stands out: its categorical tone. Moral statements do not say, 'If you feel like it, be

[70] Joyce, R. (2001). The Myth of Morality. Cambridge University Press.

kind'. They say, 'You must be kind'. This forceful framing helps override selfish impulses. It keeps people on course, even when it is inconvenient. If morality sounded optional, it would not work. But if morality evolved this way, its authority becomes suspicious. Natural selection does not aim for truth. It aims for fitness. So, if a false belief improves survival, evolution will favour it. From this view, moral beliefs are like helpful hallucinations. They get results, not because they are right, but because they shape behaviour. Critics might say this is the genetic fallacy—judging a belief's truth by its origin. But Joyce replies that if the belief system was shaped by processes blind to truth, its claims to truth are weakened. For example, disgust toward incest evolved to avoid genetic defects. But the belief that incest is 'immoral' may just be evolution's way of reinforcing a safety rule, not reflecting some eternal law. Joyce does not suggest we abandon morality completely. That would cause chaos. Instead, he explores moral fictionalism—the idea that people can use moral language and act morally, even if they do not believe in objective moral facts. Like pretending in a game, people can treat moral rules as if they are real to guide their behaviour. This view is uncomfortable. It says morality is made-up, yet necessary. But it fits with how people live: needing structure, craving meaning, but aware that much of what feels solid is built on inherited instincts. Joyce's theory challenges the deep trust people place in moral claims. If he is right, morality is not truth—but it works.

Morality as practice

In 'The Myth of Morality', Richard Joyce reaches a restrained but important conclusion. He does not claim that moral fictionalism—the idea of treating moral statements as useful fictions—is a perfect answer. Instead, he presents it as a reasonable option in a time of uncertainty. Moral beliefs, even if not true, might still help people make decisions, build communities, and resist impulsive behaviour. The value of morality may not lie in truth but in effect. People use it to shape behaviour, especially when rational calculation fails. For example, moral habits can protect against short-term temptations. When someone frames an action as 'right' rather than merely 'helpful', they are more likely to follow through. This helps in situations where long-term benefit depends on resisting momentary desires. Shared moral language allows people to condemn actions like cruelty or betrayal in a unified way. These public responses—rituals of disapproval or solidarity—reinforce bonds. Even if the underlying beliefs are false, the shared judgment strengthens the social fabric. Importantly, this view does not argue for preserving morality in its original, unquestioned form. It acknowledges that belief in moral facts conflicts with science, reason, and a modern understanding of the world. Yet it warns against discarding morality entirely, as doing so could lead to disorientation and a sense of rootlessness. Fictionalism offers a middle path: maintain the structure, abandon the metaphysical commitment. This approach may be most useful during periods of transition. Early in life, people follow moral rules because they are instructed to do so; later, as critical thinking develops, belief in objective moral truths may fade. Still, rather than dismantling the whole system, one can adopt a more pragmatic stance—acting 'as if' morality is real, just as people act 'as if' laws or social roles carry inherent authority, even when they understand them as human-made constructs. Myths in traditional societies served this function—not as literal truths, but as meaningful narratives that guided behaviour and gave coherence to communal life. The Trobriand Islanders, studied by Malinowski, upheld myths as sacred explanations for their customs, though they may have recognised their symbolic nature. The power of a myth lay in its capacity to shape action, not in its factual accuracy. Likewise, modern societies still need such guiding fictions. People seek meaning and shared orientation, even as literal belief becomes harder to sustain. Fictionalism allows continued participation in these moral frameworks without demanding full belief. It is like wearing a ceremonial mask: no one mistakes it for reality, but its ritual function remains potent. This approach is not without risks.

If people forget that the myth is fiction, it may become dogma. If they stop engaging with it altogether, they may lose the benefits it provides. The challenge is to keep the fiction alive—playfully, critically, and with awareness. Myths, including morality, can guide action even when belief has faded.

Limits of moral responsibility

In 'The Moral Significance of Ignorance[71]', Michael J. Zimmerman confronts a basic but often misunderstood problem in ethics: what people ought to do when they do not know what they ought to do. He focuses on situations where ignorance affects both moral decision-making and our judgment of blame or responsibility. Not all moral failures are equally blameworthy. Sometimes people act wrongly but do not know they are doing so. Should they still be held accountable? Zimmerman begins by distinguishing between three views of moral obligation. The objective view says one must do what is best, regardless of what one knows. The subjective view says one must do what one believes is best. The prospective view, which Zimmerman defends, says one must act based on the best available evidence. This last view acknowledges that people rarely act with perfect knowledge. Instead of demanding omniscience or excusing everything, it makes obligation sensitive to uncertainty. A key example involves a doctor—Jill—choosing a drug for her patient, John. Drug A would fully cure him, but Jill does not know that. Drug B will help somewhat. Drug C will kill him, though evidence suggests it might work. The objective view says Jill must choose Drug A, even if she has no way of knowing it is best. The subjective view excuses any choice based on her belief. But Zimmerman shows how both extremes fail. The prospective view, by contrast, directs Jill to choose based on what the evidence suggests is most likely to help. This balances realism and responsibility. From here, Zimmerman explores how ignorance affects moral responsibility—the backward-looking judgment of whether someone deserves blame. Just because someone acted wrongly does not mean they are blameworthy. That depends on whether they should have known better. A person can be wrong without being bad. Zimmerman introduces what he calls the origination thesis: to be culpable for ignorance, a person must have committed an earlier act or omission they believed was morally wrong. In other words, blame for ignorance must begin with a decision made in bad faith. Without that, ignorance may be unfortunate but not blameworthy. This idea has important consequences. Many people are blamed for actions rooted in misinformation or bad moral education. But if their ignorance was not caused by something they knew to be wrong, holding them responsible is unjust. Zimmerman argues that culpable ignorance is rare. Most ignorance is innocent. Blame, then, must be used carefully. Ignorance is not an easy excuse. But neither is it always a fault. If someone genuinely did not know and had no good reason to know, moral judgment should reflect that. The demand that people 'should have known' often relies on hindsight and unfair expectations. In uncertain moral terrain, responsibility must begin with what people could have known and controlled. Anything else risks mistaking tragic error for moral failure.

Against private language

Wittgenstein's argument against private language is not just a quirky philosophical puzzle. It challenges how people think about meaning, sensations, and what it means to understand another person. John Cook's analysis in 'Wittgenstein on Privacy[72]' helps clarify a topic often misrepresented. The core claim Wittgenstein makes is simple but radical: a truly

[71] Zimmerman, M.J. (2008) The Moral Significance of Ignorance. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[72] Cook, J. (1980) Wittgenstein on Privacy, in A.P. Martinich (ed.) The Philosophy of Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

private language—one where words refer only to sensations known by a single speaker—is incoherent. Not just impractical, but impossible. Many people think private language makes sense because sensations feel private. No one else can feel another's pain. This leads to the assumption that if sensations are private, then words referring to them must also be private. For example, a person might believe that when they say 'pain', the word directly refers to their private feeling. According to this logic, no one else could ever fully grasp what the word means, because they cannot access that private sensation. This is the first mistake. Wittgenstein challenges this reasoning by showing how flawed it is. Saying that no one else can feel another's pain is like saying no one else can cast another's shadow. That is true, but irrelevant. Just because you cannot feel someone's pain does not mean you cannot understand what they mean when they say they are in pain. Understanding does not require shared sensation—it requires shared practices, expressions, and reactions. He also questions the very idea of 'knowing your own pain'. To say 'I know I am in pain' adds nothing to the simple fact of being in pain. You do not learn that you are in pain the way you learn it is raining outside. There is no need for verification. The phrase 'I know I am in pain' only makes sense in certain situations—for instance, when you are trying to persuade someone who doubts you. But in most cases, the phrase is redundant or misleading. Cook draws attention to another key misunderstanding: the idea that words like 'pain' work like labels you attach to private sensations. But Wittgenstein says that's not how language works. Sensation words are learnt in context. A child learns to say 'pain' not by inspecting their feelings, but by crying, reacting, and having adults name what they see. These words are taught through shared experiences and expressions, not introspection. The meaning of 'pain' lies in its use in public language—not in a private mental note. Wittgenstein's famous beetle-in-the-box analogy illustrates this. Imagine everyone has a box with something inside called a 'beetle', but no one can investigate another's box. Over time, what is inside becomes irrelevant. What matters is how the word 'beetle' is used. Similarly, what one feels when saying 'pain' is less important than how the word is used in shared situations. In the end, Wittgenstein shows that language is not a mirror of private experience but a public activity. Meaning depends on use, not inner reference. The dream of a private language—a code only one person can understand—is not just impractical. It is a philosophical illusion.

Problems of knowledge

In 'Language and Problems of Knowledge[73]', Noam Chomsky explores the deep structure of language and its central role in human cognition. At the heart of his argument lies the idea that every person is born with a language faculty—a biologically determined system in the mind/brain that makes language acquisition possible. This system, common to all humans, interacts with limited data from the environment to produce a rich and complex internal language. Chomsky calls this process an example of 'Plato's problem': how do people gain so much knowledge from so little evidence? Language is not just a means of communication. It is a cognitive tool that reflects how people think, imagine, and interpret the world. Even in infancy, when input is minimal, children quickly generate grammars that allow them to understand and produce speech. These grammars are not taught. They emerge from within, shaped by what Chomsky calls 'universal grammar'—a set of principles and parameters built into the human mind. The child's task is not to invent language, but to set the parameters based on what they hear around them. This innate structure explains why language acquisition is so rapid and uniform across cultures. Even children with disabilities, or those raised in impoverished linguistic environments, develop language with surprising depth. The system is

[73] Chomsky, N. (1988) Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

robust and flexible, capable of building language from very little input. Studies on deaf children, who spontaneously invent their own sign systems when no formal language is available, further demonstrate the internal strength of the language faculty. Chomsky also draws attention to Descartes's problem: the creative use of language. People do not just repeat phrases they have heard. They construct entirely new sentences—many of which they have never heard before. This creativity cannot be explained by behaviourist models that treat language as learnt habit. Instead, Chomsky argues that linguistic performance must be guided by internal mental systems that are specifically structured for language use. This leads to another crucial insight: language is not learnt like riding a bicycle or solving a math problem. It is more like growing a limb. With the right environment, it happens naturally, almost passively. The data from experience merely triggers the growth of a structure that is already internally defined. Learning vocabulary may involve some memorisation, but the deeper syntactic rules emerge from within. Chomsky's framework shifts the study of language from behaviour to biology. He suggests that understanding the language faculty is essential to understanding the mind itself. Since language reveals how people think, it becomes a powerful lens for investigating cognition. But this study is still limited by ethical and technical constraints. Unlike the visual system, language cannot be studied easily in animals, because it appears to be unique to humans. Nor can children be placed in experimental conditions to observe language development directly. Still, progress is possible through theoretical models and careful linguistic analysis. These models aim to explain how universal grammar operates, how it can produce the variation seen across human languages, and how it allows for such richness and creativity from such limited data. Chomsky's work continues to shape the way people think about language—not as a social convention, but as a window into the architecture of the human mind.

Ignorance of language

Michael Devitt's 'Ignorance of Language[74]' challenges a central idea in modern linguistics: that people know the rules of their language as internal mental representations. Devitt critiques Noam Chomsky's Representational Thesis (RT), which claims that speakers have unconscious, propositional knowledge of grammar encoded in their minds. This knowledge supposedly explains their ability to judge what is grammatical and what is not. But Devitt argues that this way of thinking about language and the mind is mistaken. He suggests that linguistic competence does not require such internal representations. Chomsky's program begins with the idea that competent speakers 'know' their language. That knowledge, he argues, is embedded in a mental module—the 'language faculty'—which stores internalised rules. These rules, or principles, guide speakers in producing and understanding sentences, even if they are unaware of them. Chomsky describes this knowledge as propositional. Speakers, in this view, have internal theories or beliefs about their language, and their grammatical judgments follow from rational deductions based on those beliefs. Their intuitions, then, are like the 'voice' of this hidden competence. Devitt sees problems with this approach. He questions whether linguistic rules must be represented in the mind at all. A person might be competent in a language without knowing or mentally encoding any rules. Language use, he suggests, could be better explained through behaviour shaped by broader cognitive capacities, not by invoking theoretical knowledge inside the head. Devitt stresses a shift from 'knowledge' to 'competence'. Rather than assuming people store rules, linguists should focus on describing the structures that competence produces. Devitt introduces an important distinction between structure rules and processing rules. Structure rules determine what counts as a grammatically well-formed sentence. Processing rules, by contrast, describe how people produce or comprehend these sentences. The

[74] Devitt, M. (2006) Ignorance of Language, Oxford University Press.

two kinds of rules are not necessarily the same. For example, in chess, a bishop moves diagonally—that is a structure rule. But how a player remembers or plans a bishop's move involves processing. In language, the same applies: a speaker might generate a correct sentence without following a mental 'rule' like a logic proof. They just do it, perhaps without knowing why it works. Importantly, Devitt argues that a grammar is not a theory of the mind but a theory of linguistic reality. The object of linguistic study is not what happens inside the brain, but the patterns, outputs, and structure of the language itself. A grammar, then, is a model of these external patterns—an idealised system that reflects the regularities of language use. Whether or not this system is mirrored inside the mind is a separate question. Devitt believes that linguistic research should not be tied to assumptions about mental representation. Chomsky's focus on 'I-language' (internal language) leads him to prefer studying idiolects—individual systems—over shared public languages. He also downplays the role of convention and meaning in communication, suggesting that people do not always aim for mutual understanding. But Devitt argues that this undervalues how central shared conventions are to communication. Without regular, stable meanings understood across a community, language would lose its power to express and convey thought. Finally, Devitt challenges the idea that language is separate from thought. Chomsky seems to hold that the two operate through different systems. Yet, if language expresses thought, then understanding thought's structure is essential to understanding language. Devitt believes the link between thought and language should be central to linguistic theory. 'Ignorance of Language' questions the belief that grammar lives inside the head. Devitt urges a return to external, observable language—what people say and how it behaves. His aim is to refocus linguistics on the patterns of language itself, and not on unverifiable mental representations. This view, he argues, offers a clearer and more grounded approach to understanding linguistic competence and communication.

The ends of language

Søren Kierkegaard's writing resists clear definition. Was he a philosopher? A theologian? A writer of fiction? The question itself reflects the very tension that his work provokes—a tension between the authority of authorship and the instability of meaning. Geoffrey A. Hale, in 'Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language[75]', argues that this instability is not accidental but essential. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, multiple styles, and rhetorical layering reveals a deeper commitment to exploring the limits of language as a medium for truth. If language cannot deliver certainty, then the very gesture of writing becomes an existential act of confrontation with its own failure. Kierkegaard deliberately undermines the notion that the signed name determines a text's meaning. The pseudonymous works, often treated as indirect theological commentaries, are not simply masks for hidden truth. They are performances of fragmentation. They confront readers with conflicting perspectives that are never harmonised. Hale insists that authorship and authority must be uncoupled. The name 'Kierkegaard' becomes a symbol of multiple voices, none of which can claim final interpretive dominance. Meaning emerges not from the author's intention but from the text's unresolved multiplicity and the reader's interpretive engagement. This leads to a different understanding of reading. Traditional interpretation aims to locate stable meaning, but Kierkegaard's writing denies that stability. As Hale explains, his work enacts the failure of system, of synthesis, and of absolute knowledge. Language is not a transparent conduit for ideas but a terrain of ambiguity, paradox, and irony. The reader becomes responsible for constructing meaning out of this disorientation. Rather than offering answers, Kierkegaard's texts expose the inadequacy of language to contain ultimate truths. Here, Theodor Adorno's early reflections on Kierkegaard become crucial. Adorno saw

[75] Hale, G.A. (2007) Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

in Kierkegaard's style a resistance to conceptual closure. In 'Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic', he argued that Kierkegaard's aesthetic form is inseparable from his philosophical content. The aphorisms, pseudonyms, and ironic reversals are not decorative; they are the medium of thought itself. For Adorno, to think philosophically is to think through the failures of language, not around them. He writes that 'all philosophical critique is today possible as language critique'. This means that philosophical truth is not something separable from the way it is said. Thought and expression are entangled. Kierkegaard's writing dramatises this entanglement. His existential categories—despair, anxiety, subjectivity—cannot be detached from the stylistic form in which they appear. The dialectic of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages is not just a system of concepts. It is a way of writing. Each stage corresponds to a different rhetorical register. Each voice, whether Judge Wilhelm or Johannes Climacus, performs a limited vision of existence. The totality never arrives. There is no final synthesis. The reader is left with fragments, and these fragments resist unity. Hale underscores this point: to read Kierkegaard is not to discover a doctrine but to participate in a struggle. It is a struggle with the failure of language to bear the weight of metaphysical certainty. Kierkegaard does not offer a system of truth; he offers the breakdown of all systems. The 'ends' of language, in this sense, are both its goals and its limits. Language reaches toward transcendence and yet constantly falls back into finitude. The irony, repetition, and circular reasoning in his texts mirror this dynamic. This is why Kierkegaard's work remains deeply relevant. In an age saturated with communication, the idea that language fails remains a radical proposition. Kierkegaard teaches that meaning is not guaranteed by authority—whether religious, philosophical, or linguistic. It is always contingent, always in flux. The reader cannot passively receive meaning but must undergo the anxiety of interpretation. This is not a flaw; it is the condition of existence. In this way, Kierkegaard's legacy is not a set of propositions but a mode of engagement. He does not argue for truth in the usual sense. He performs the impossibility of truth in language. To follow him is not to agree with a position but to enter a space of doubt, irony, and repetition. Meaning is not given. It must be lived, and its expression will always remain uncertain. Language, for Kierkegaard, is not a solution. It is the site of the problem. It marks the distance between thought and expression, between the infinite and the finite. His writing inhabits that distance, refusing to resolve it. And in doing so, it forces readers to confront not only the limits of language but the limits of themselves.

Freedom and interpretation

In the afterword of 'Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language', freedom is described as elusive—neither fully conceptualizable nor something that can be definitively possessed. As Geoffrey A. Hale writes, seek freedom within systems of thought—political, philosophical, or linguistic—is already to lose it. Freedom does not live inside ideals. It does not exist as a hidden truth waiting to be revealed. If anything, it exists in its absence, in its refusal to become stable or complete. To speak of freedom, then, is to speak of something that escapes language. It may be more accurate to remain silent than to try to name it. Concepts, by nature, are universal. They apply broadly and aim for consistency. But freedom is not consistent. If it were, it would be law, not freedom. A concept of freedom is already a limit on what freedom might be. To universalise freedom is to make it obedient to form, and anything obedient is not free. If freedom is to matter, it must exist in the moment, in the, in what is actual. Not in abstract ideals. Still, no author has entirely escaped the pull of the universal. Each writer returns to the tension between the fragment and the whole, between the finite and the infinite. They begin with the particular but feel the need to look beyond it. The alone cannot sustain meaning. Yet no universal ideal has ever managed to account for particularity without distortion. This is the problem freedom presents: it exceeds any system that tries to define it, but it also cannot stand

alone as pure exception. This is where interpretation enters. Interpretation is not merely about understanding a text. It is about how one approaches the difference between the universal and the. Franz Kafka framed interpretation as a kind of responsibility. Not a duty to explain or justify a text, but a duty to remain with its strangeness, to refuse to reduce it. If freedom cannot be a concept but might still be a possession, what does that mean? And who possesses it? Interpretation, especially in the sense Adorno gives it, is not about resolving meaning. It is about attending to what breaks in the act of meaning-making. In 'Sprachkritik', or critique of language, Adorno sees philosophy itself as an interpretive act that never leaves language behind. It is not method, but response. It begins with the refusal of total explanation. It looks for the cracks in the surface of ideas, the places where universality fails. Those failures are the very material of interpretation. Adorno does not seek to unify meaning. He reads texts as ruins—remnants of thought that never fully hold. To interpret is to sort through fragments. Freedom appears not as some grand ideal, but in the movement between these pieces. Not as a truth to discover, but as a task to perform. Interpretation, then, is not liberation in the full sense. It is freedom within constraint—the kind that exists only when the speaker knows language is never enough and speaks anyway.

Decline of meaning

Ludwig Wittgenstein once listed Oswald Spengler as a major influence. This detail, often overlooked, seems surprising given how rarely Spengler appears in discussions of Wittgenstein's work[76]. Yet the connection runs deeper than a passing mention. Spengler's sweeping vision of civilisational rise and decline, laid out in 'The Decline of the West', shaped more than just cultural history—it resonated with the anxieties and sensibilities that Wittgenstein later expressed in his philosophy. Spengler saw history as cyclical. Cultures bloom like living organisms, reach a peak, and eventually decline into sterile civilisations. Each culture, he claimed, has a soul—an inner style that cannot be translated or transferred. This notion of cultural insularity appealed to Wittgenstein. In his 'Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough', he criticised the anthropologist's attempt to explain so-called primitive rituals through the lens of modern scientific rationality. For Wittgenstein, Frazer failed to see that different cultures possess radically different ways of making sense of the world. This failure echoed Spengler's warning: no single framework can capture the meaning of all cultural forms. Though Wittgenstein never adopted Spengler's method or grand historical vision, he shared a sense of cultural exhaustion. In the preface to 'Philosophical Remarks', Wittgenstein described modern European life as disjointed and spiritually empty. Spengler's idea that the West had moved from culture to civilisation—a phase of decline marked by mechanisation, rationalisation, and loss of purpose—found a quiet echo in Wittgenstein's despair about the fragmentation of meaning in modernity. Yet Wittgenstein's response was not to retreat into historical fatalism. Instead, he turned to language—not as a vehicle for eternal truths, but as the everyday medium through which people live, act, and understand. His concept of language games in 'Philosophical Investigations' implies that meaning arises from usage within forms of life, not from abstract systems. Like Spengler, he distrusted universal explanations. But unlike Spengler, Wittgenstein focused not on historical cycles but on the structures of ordinary experience. Both thinkers rejected the idea of system-building. Spengler criticised Enlightenment rationalism: Wittgenstein abandoned the search for philosophical foundations. They preferred local understanding to universal theory. For Spengler, this meant viewing cultures as sealed worlds. For Wittgenstein, it meant paying attention to how language works in context. Though their projects were different, they shared a sense that modern thought had overreached—and that

[76] DeAngelis, W. J. (1994) 'Wittgenstein and Spengler', Dialogue, 33(1), pp. 41–62.

understanding must return to the ground of lived tradition. Their shared pessimism was not purely destructive. It opened the way for a kind of humility. Wittgenstein learnt from Spengler that the urge to totalise knowledge can obscure what is most real. What remains is not theory but attention—to the ordinary, the particular, the finite.

5. LANGUAGING

5.1. Languaging

(Practice of language: The activity of meaning-making)

'Languaging is a process through which we become intelligible to each other—not through rules, but through relation'.

— Deborah Tannen, Talking Voices

'Speaking is not about sending messages but about bringing forth a world with others'.

— E. von Glasersfeld, Radical Constructivism

Language is not a thing

To speak of 'languaging' is to move away from the illusion that language is a fixed system of signs, structures, or symbols. It is instead to regard language as something people do, not merely what they have. The term itself resists reification. It shifts attention from language as product to the living act of speaking, listening, and meaning-making—a verb instead of a noun. This reframing allows one to see communication not as the transfer of ideas between two stable minds, but as the co-emergence of meaning between bodies, intentions, and environments. In this view, language is never isolated from the context in which it unfolds. A word, gesture, pause, or even silence acquires significance not by virtue of belonging to a universal code, but through the situation in which it is enacted. Theories of languaging reject the abstract separation between speaker and listener, mind and body, signifier and signified. Language, like perception, arises in the space between. It is relational. It is coordination. It is action. Humberto Maturana[77], who helped popularise the term, described 'languaging' as a coordination of behaviour within a consensual domain. Language does not merely describe the world—it helps bring it into being. The world that is known and shared is co-constructed through the ongoing act of languaging. In this sense, words do not stand for things; they participate in how things are made present. This shifts communication from a mechanism of transmission to a form of ontological emergence. Language is not a mirror but a lens. This emphasis on practice over structure also calls into question the foundational assumptions of traditional linguistics, which treats language as a system of signs to be mapped and decoded. But what if language is not stable enough for such treatment? What if it is always in flux, always becoming? Languaging, then, acknowledges the fluidity of communication—the way speech stumbles, adapts, recycles, and improvises in the face of context and need. Children do not learn 'language' as a set of rules; they learn to

[77] Maturana, H.R. and Varela, F.J. (1987) The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding. Boston: Shambhala.

language, to participate, to attune. The implications are both philosophical and political. If meaning arises through interaction rather than pre-existing rules, then no interpretation can claim finality. There is no outside point from which to grasp the totality of meaning. All speech is situated. All meaning is negotiated. This calls for humility in discourse, a recognition that understanding is always partial, provisional, and embodied. Languaging foregrounds the fragility of mutuality, the difficulty of making oneself known, and the deep need for trust in all acts of speech. Rather than asking what language is, languaging asks: what are people doing when they speak? What worlds are they enacting, what relationships are they shaping, what futures are they making possible? Language is not an object; it is a dance of understanding, a lived negotiation of sense.

Freezing languages

Language often feels like something solid, like an object with parts you can name, classify, and dissect. In 'On Languaging and Languages[78]' Nigel Love challenges this idea. He argues that what we call 'a language' is not a naturally given thing, but a product of reflective activity—something that emerges from how people talk about language itself. Languaging, in this sense, refers not to a fixed code but to the dynamic act of making meaning through speech, gesture, or text. It is a continuous process, not a system stored in the mind. This distinction becomes especially important when considering how writing distorts our sense of what language is. Writing freezes language. It pulls words out of context, strips away tone, gesture, and situation, and presents language as if it were made up of stable, countable units. Through this process, signs become abstract. Words appear isolated and repeatable. This illusion gives rise to the belief that 'languages' exist out there—structures made up of fixed forms and rules that people use. Love warns that this abstraction feeds into a false ontology. It makes us believe in languages as objects when they are better understood as outcomes of reflective practices. When people speak, they do not access a stored grammar or a lexicon in the brain. They respond, adapt, improvise. They draw on memory, yes, but not as a rigid system. The grammar that linguists describe is a product of analysis, not something speakers necessarily use consciously. Love highlights how writing and linguistic theory together have led to a kind of reification. Linguistic units become things that appear to exist independently of the activity that generates them. This is a major problem when theorising about language acquisition or speech production. Another issue Love raises is the idea of 'orders' of language. He notes that speaking about language—using metalanguage—creates a second-order system. This second-order use shapes how people conceptualise first-order speech. Over time, the second-order becomes dominant, influencing education, theory, and even self-perception. A person might begin to think of their speech as 'correct' or 'incorrect' based on norms that arise from this metalinguistic layer. This is why Love urges us to pay attention to the act of languaging. When people use language, they are not always operating under a set of known rules or reproducing a shared code. They are engaging in a form of action, constructing meaning with others in real time. The concept of languaging places emphasis on emergence, on participation, on situatedness. It helps counter the illusion that language is a thing one can hold, describe, or store like an object. In the end, Love's point is simple but profound: talking about language shapes what we think language is. But this thinking, when unexamined, can create problems. To understand language better, one must return to the messiness of languaging—to its flow, uncertainty, and reflexive depth.

[78] Love, N. (2004) 'On Languaging and Languages', Language Sciences, 26(6), pp. 609–628.

Everyday language

Classrooms are not only spaces for learning facts. They are places where identities are shaped through talk. 'Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms[79]' David Bloome and Faythe Beauchemin argue that the way people use language in classrooms—what they call 'languaging'—plays a central role in forming what it means to be a person in that setting. Language here is not a thing but an activity. It happens in real time, between people. It is not stored in the brain like a dictionary but emerges in the flow of social life. Instead of treating language as a fixed system, this view sees it as a verb—something done. Languaging is how people act on one another. It is how they express themselves, respond, relate, and reveal who they are. Teachers, students, researchers, and even parents all take part in this process. Every moment of speech is part of a larger, living negotiation of values, roles, and recognition. The paper focuses on a specific classroom writing event to illustrate this. A student named Sarah, working with her peers in an AP English class, momentarily shifts from discussing her essay to speaking about her personal identity. Her peers respond, but soon the talk returns to the essay itself. This shift reveals a tension between two ways of seeing people. One treats the student as a full human being—a 'Thou' in Martin Buber's terms. The other sees her as a role-player—a 'It' within the structure of academic performance. Bloome and Beauchemin suggest that these shifts matter. When classrooms are built around measurable tasks and outcomes, personhood risks becoming narrow. People are reduced to their ability to perform, produce, or comply. But when moments of real dialogue emerge, even briefly, students can affirm each other's complexity. Languaging, in this sense, becomes a moral act. It shapes how people are seen, and how they see themselves. This has implications beyond that one peer group. The way teachers talk to students, the way researchers describe classroom events, and the way school systems define 'success'—all of these contribute to a larger picture of who counts, and how. Languaging is never neutral. It reflects and reinforces deeper ideas about humanity, belonging, and recognition. Rather than ask what language is, the authors urge us to pay attention to what language does in daily interactions. They challenge the idea that competence in language is just about grammar or vocabulary. It is also about the ability to enter relationships, to be acknowledged, to participate meaningfully. In classrooms, this can either affirm or erode a student's sense of being seen. Sarah's moment of vulnerability was fleeting. But it showed how languaging can open a space for more human connection—even in a structured, academic environment. Recognising these moments helps shift the focus from performance to presence, from role to person.

Languaging as world-making

Language is often treated as something known—an object that can be studied, categorised, and explained. In 'Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language[80]' E. Demuro and L. Gurney argue that this assumption limits what language can be. Instead of asking what we know about language, they propose we ask what language is, or more radically, what language does. This shift—from knowledge to being—moves inquiry into the realm of ontology. Language becomes not just a tool for describing the world, but a force that shapes it. It is world-making. The article draws from what scholars call the 'ontological turn', particularly in anthropology and language studies. This movement urges

[79] Bloome, D. and Beauchemin, F. (2021) 'Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms', Language and Dialogue, 11(1), pp. 1–24.
[80] Demuro, E. and Gurney, L. (2021) 'Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language', Language and Intercultural Communication, 21(5), pp. 530–544.

researchers to stop assuming a single reality and instead consider how different communities live in different worlds, with different languages that make those worlds possible. Demuro and Gurney explore this idea through three ontologies of language: language as object, language as practice, and language as assemblage. The first is the most familiar. Language as object assumes that language is a thing—structured, rule-bound, and separable from its users. This view underpins much of linguistics and language education. It treats language as a system that can be mastered, stored, and transmitted. But in doing so, it strips language of its context. It assumes a universal logic, ignoring how meaning depends on place, body, and relation. The second ontology sees language as practice. Here, language is not a static system but a set of actions. Speaking, listening, gesturing—these are all ways of being in the world. Language happens, not in isolation, but in interaction. This view has roots in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. It emphasises the local, the lived, and the emergent. Language is not used; it is enacted. Meaning does not pre-exist; it arises between people. The third and most complex ontology is language as assemblage. In this view, language is not a unified whole but a shifting network of elements—sounds, gestures, technologies, bodies, histories. It is not singular but plural. Not stable but contingent. This ontology draws on thinkers like Bruno Latour and decolonial scholars who argue that meaning-making always involves material, cultural, and political entanglements. Language is always more than language. It is embedded in power, memory, and resistance. All three ontologies—object, practice, assemblage—coexist in tension. Most societies rely on a mix of them. But treating one as definitive can obscure the others. Demuro and Gurney argue that language studies often default to the object view, especially in schooling and policy. This has real effects. It shapes what counts as knowledge, whose speech is recognised, and whose world is made visible. By shifting toward ontology, the authors invite a more expansive understanding of language. They want to decolonise how people think about linguistic difference. Instead of seeing some varieties as 'less developed' or 'incorrect', we can recognise them as different ways of being—different worldings. Languaging, in this sense, becomes more than communication. It becomes a political and existential act. Every time someone speaks, they do more than pass on information. They make a world appear. They position themselves, relate to others, and reconfigure what matters. The question, then, is not just 'What language do you speak?' but 'What world are you making when you speak?' By exploring language through ontologies, Demuro and Gurney offer a deeper, more pluralist approach. It is not about replacing one theory with another. It is about noticing how concepts of language shape research, education, and life itself.

Language as a local practice

Language is not a fixed code carried from one place to another. It is an action—something done, not something had. In 'Language as a Local Practice[81]', Alastair Pennycook argues that language must be understood not as a neutral system but as an activity shaped by time, place, and social relationships. Language is local not just because it happens in a place, but because it helps create the place in which it happens. To call language a local practice is to challenge the idea that language exists independently of use. Most linguistic theories start with language as a structure, a system with rules. But this view forgets the messy, embodied, lived nature of speaking. When someone talks, writes, gestures, or listens, they are doing more than exchanging words. They are enacting roles, shaping space, and negotiating meaning in real time. Language does not just describe the world—it participates in making it. The idea of 'local' does not simply mean 'not global'. It points to how all communication is rooted histories, geographies, and

[81] Pennycook, A. (2010) Language as a Local Practice. London: Routledge.

relationships. Even global forms like English are always used locally, in ways that reflect specific concerns and values. The postcard, Pennycook notes, is a good example. Writing a postcard is not just writing in English or French or any other code. It is a form of communication that depends on where you are, whom you are writing to, what you want to say, and how you want to be seen. It is local because it is shaped by the place and moment in which it has written. This approach shifts focus from language systems to language practices. What people do with language becomes more important than what language is assumed to be. Instead of asking how a pre-existing system is used in different situations, Pennycook asks how language itself emerges from those situations. Speaking in a classroom, texting a friend, or writing graffiti on a wall—each of these is a distinct practice with its own logic and force. Language here is not applied to context; it is part of the context's construction. Such a view challenges traditional distinctions between languages. In everyday life, people do not switch between sealed codes. They draw from a wide repertoire—gestures, dialects, bits of different tongues—to make themselves understood. Language is fluid, relational, and hybrid. This has implications for how language is taught, researched, and governed. Rather than enforcing boundaries between languages, policies and practices should attend to the diverse ways people already use them. Pennycook also argues that thinking locally is not anti-theoretical. On the contrary, it requires deeper reflection on how meaning is produced in space and time. Practices are not just habits—they are actions with histories. To understand them, one must explore how power, memory, and identity circulate through everyday speech. Language is never neutral. It carries with it ideas of who belongs, who is heard, and what counts as knowledge.

An embodied activity

In 'Language and Languaging[82]' A. L. Becker argues that to speak of language is always to speak about what it means to be human. Language is not just a system of sounds and meanings—it is a way of living in the world. The structuralist tradition, from Saussure to Chomsky, has long treated language as a closed system. It maps sounds to meanings through layers of syntax and rules. But Becker urges a different approach: to shift the focus from language as an abstract object to languaging as an embodied activity. This shift matters. Structuralist linguistics assumes that language exists independently of use. It imagines that grammar is innate, that rules exist in the mind before speech begins. Yet this view struggles with questions of time and change. It cannot easily explain how meaning shifts, or how people adapt speech in real situations. It flattens language into structure, ignoring history, memory, and intention. Becker challenges these assumptions. He questions the idea that language is simply a code for transmitting thoughts. Instead, he proposes that communication is orientational. It is less about encoding meanings and more about guiding attention—about helping others locate a perspective or share a stance. This view draws from Wittgenstein's language games and from the work of Maturana and Varela, who described language as a living interaction between organisms. Languaging, in this sense, begins not with abstract grammar but with memory. Children do not absorb rules—they remember fragments of speech, reshape them, and use them in new contexts. Language learning becomes a process of building a repertoire of remembered texts. Grammar emerges from this process as a set of useful strategies, not as a universal code. Becker uses his experience teaching Southeast Asian languages to show the limits of formal instruction. In languages like Burmese, knowing grammatical categories or vocabulary lists often does not help much. What matters is memory—the ability to recall utterances in their

[82] Becker, A.L. (1995) 'Language and Languaging', in Davis, H. and Taylor, T.J. (eds.) Redefining Linguistics. London: Routledge, pp. 139–149.

social setting, to understand how meaning arises from context. Languaging involves navigating space and time, not just applying rules. One of the key problems with structuralist models is their circular logic. They assume that meaning exists outside language and is merely mapped onto it. But if meanings are themselves shaped by language, then this model fails. It presumes what it should be trying to explain. Worse, it reifies language, treating it as a thing rather than a process. Becker's alternative is to treat language as human action. He proposes that what matters is not a system of sounds and meanings but the ongoing process of making sense together. Languaging, he argues, is always local, historical, and social. It is a dynamic activity that reflects and shapes how people live, think, and remember. Language, then, is not a fixed object. It is a way of being in the world—a form of remembering, orienting, and responding that unfolds over time.

Shaping meaning with others

Language is often imagined as a fixed system—something to be learnt, mastered, and applied correctly. But in everyday life, it works differently. In 'Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children[83]', Martha Sif Karrebæk, Lian Malai Madsen, and Janus Spindler Møller explore how children and youth use language not as isolated systems but as living practices. They propose a shift from thinking about separate 'languages' to seeing what people do with words in daily situations. The term languaging is key. It focuses on the activity of speaking, listening, reacting, and shaping meaning with others. Rather than labelling speech as Danish, Arabic, or English, this perspective highlights the fluid mixing, shifting, and repurposing of linguistic elements. In a multilingual and digitally connected world, children rarely stick to one language. Instead, they move between styles, tones, and vocabularies. These shifts are not random. They reflect social goals, group dynamics, and shared histories. The research was conducted in a Copenhagen school, where the authors worked closely with students from diverse backgrounds. What they observed was not chaos, but creativity. Young people actively made sense of their world through language. They shaped identities, built alliances, teased, resisted, and sometimes affirmed dominant norms. Their languaging was part of everyday play, conflict, and learning. It was not just a mirror of society—it was a way of shaping it. One important idea in the book is that meaning is not fixed in advance. It is made on the spot, in interaction. Children are not just users of inherited language systems; they are co-creators of meaning. The authors call attention to how specific utterances connect to broader social patterns. A single joke or turn of phrase can reflect family influence, peer group norms, or the pressure of institutional language policies. This view of language challenges the traditional idea of linguistic competence. It is not about knowing a standard form. It is about knowing how to navigate different voices, registers, and expectations. The students in this study demonstrate how deeply embedded language is in the social fabric of everyday life. Their language choices show how people adjust, resist, and innovate to fit their circumstances. Another key insight is that these linguistic practices are tied to larger social trajectories. Small moments of interaction—on a playground or in a classroom—accumulate over time. They shape how children see themselves, and how they are seen by others. Language becomes a tool for positioning oneself in a world of shifting values and power dynamics. This research encourages linguists to look closely, to stay grounded in real-life practice. By focusing on languaging, rather than abstract rules or ideal speakers, it becomes possible to understand how language is lived.

[83] Karrebæk, M.S., Madsen, L.M. and Møller, J.S. (2015) Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children and Youth. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

From language to assemblages

Language is often imagined as a system—a structure of words, rules, and meanings passed from one generation to the next. In 'Tracing New Ground: From Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages[84]' Laura Gurney and Eugenia Demuro ask us to think differently. In their article, they explore how recent shifts in linguistics—especially the multilingual and ontological turns—invite a rethinking of what language is. The key idea they put forward is a movement from language as a thing, to languaging as an act. This change matters. It loosens the grip of old models that treat language as fixed, bounded, and stable. Instead, it brings attention to language as something people *do*—a way of being, acting, and responding in a world shaped by movement, interaction, and change. Languaging happens in real time, with real bodies, in specific situations. It draws from various resources—words, gestures, sounds, memories—and stitches them together in ways that fit the moment. The article draws from assemblage theory to go even further. Assemblage thinking sees the world not as made up of stable entities, but of shifting configurations—temporary gatherings of people, tools, histories, and ideas. Language, then, is not a thing we carry around. It is something that arises when elements come together. It is shaped by technology, emotion, institutions, and power. It shifts with context, evolves with time, and adapts as needed. Gurney and Demuro argue that even within the multilingual turn, language is still often treated as divisible—this language, that code, this grammar. But real-life languaging resists neat boundaries. A conversation may mix slang, standard forms, and foreign words. A speaker may move fluidly across what institutions would call 'languages'. Rather than thinking in terms of language purity, the authors push for a recognition of this fluid, adaptive, messy practice. Their research challenges traditional assumptions: that there are pure forms of language, that monolingualism is the norm, or that communication is just the transfer of ideas between minds. Instead, they suggest that meaning is built in the moment—through touch, timing, repetition, and shared context. Languaging is not just symbolic—it is embodied and material. Assemblage thinking helps to make sense of this. It invites us to see how language is part of broader networks: political ideologies, technological tools, school systems, family traditions. No element stands alone. Meaning emerges through connections—connections that can shift, stretch, or break. By turning attention to languaging, Gurney and Demuro open the door to new kinds of research and reflection. They ask what language does in the world, how it moves through power, and how it changes the people who use it. Language is no longer an object to be studied from a distance. It is a practice to be lived and understood in motion.

Soft linguistic terrorism

Language shapes identity, and it also polices it. In his article 'Soft Linguistic Terrorism[85]', Mike Mena explores how institutions maintain control over people through the subtle regulation of how they speak. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of linguistic terrorism, which described the punishment of Chicanos for speaking non-standard forms of English or Spanish, Mena argues that a softer version now dominates—less violent, but just as insidious. This form does not punish directly; it persuades, rewards, and seduces people into conformity. At the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), over 90% of students are Mexican or Mexican American. The university brands itself as bilingual, yet the Spanish it values is not the

[84] Gurney, L. and Demuro, E. (2020) 'Tracing New Ground: From Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages', Journal of Sociolinguistics, 24(4), pp. 453–470.
[85] Mena, M. (2023) 'Soft Linguistic Terrorism: 21st Century Re-Articulations', Educational Linguistics, 1(1), pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2023-0003

local Spanish spoken in the region. It is a polished, distant, elite version—'Mexico City Spanish' or Castilian Spanish from Spain. Local speech, full of code-switching and regional flair, is quietly pushed aside. It is treated as unsophisticated, a barrier to success. Students are encouraged to 'polish' their Spanish—to improve it not for communication, but for marketability. Mena calls this process soft linguistic terrorism. Unlike the harsh punishments of the past, which banned Spanish in classrooms or beat it out of children, today's system works by creating incentives. Speak 'correct' Spanish, and you are more likely to succeed. Learn to code-switch in a way that mimics elite norms, and doors open. This is how power operates now—not through fear, but through desire. But the effect is the same: a devaluation of local identity and internalised shame about one's way of speaking. The article is grounded in interviews with students and faculty, many of whom describe a quiet but persistent pressure to distance themselves from their linguistic roots. One student, a poet fluent in academic Spanish, still asks his mother if his writing 'makes sense'. Her Spanish, spoken at home, carries emotional authority, but little institutional weight. Another student reflects on being told that improving her Spanish would make her 'more marketable', a phrase that hides coercion behind opportunity. Mena's own life illustrates this generational impact. His mother, punished for speaking Spanish in school, insisted her children speak English to avoid the same fate. Years later, Mena himself, as a teacher, would correct his students' Spanish, believing he was helping them succeed. Only later did he realise he was passing on the same ideology—teaching that success meant speaking like someone else. What makes this process 'soft' is its subtlety. It masks hierarchy with the language of choice and opportunity. Institutions no longer need to punish overtly; they only need to create an ideal and reward those who move toward it. The rest are left behind—not by force, but by the quiet erosion of confidence, by the normalisation of inferiority. In the end, soft linguistic terrorism is not about language alone. It is about power, belonging, and the politics of respectability. To resist it, Mena argues, people must reclaim the value of their own speech. The Spanish of the Valley is not broken; it is rich, adaptive, and alive. Recognising its worth is a first step toward dismantling the systems that still teach students to feel less for speaking in their own voice.

5.2. Sociolinguistics

(Speaking Society: Language, identity, and social Life)

'There is no language outside of the situation; every utterance is a negotiation with context'.

— Dell Hymes, Foundations in Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language and society shape each other. It looks at how people speak, not just in terms of grammar, but within the social worlds they inhabit. Language is never neutral—it always carries traces of class, age, gender, region, and power. Sociolinguists study how people use language differently depending on who they are, where they come from, and what kind of relationships they have with others. The field connects closely with linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, and the sociology of language. It focuses on how communication works in real life, in everyday conversations, not just in idealised, standard forms. The questions sociolinguists ask are often shaped by practical realities: Why do people speak differently in school than at home? Why does a New Yorker sound different from someone in Mississippi? Why is one accent considered 'proper' and another 'lazy'? These are

not just linguistic differences—they are reflections of social values. The roots of sociolinguistics can be traced back to early 20th-century dialectology. Scholars like Hans Kurath and Raven McDavid mapped dialects across the United States. But the shift toward sociolinguistics really began in the 1960s, when William Labov[86] began studying language variation in urban communities. Labov's research revealed that patterns of speech vary with social class and that these variations are systematic and meaningful—not signs of error, but of identity. Other major figures shaped the field in different ways. Dell Hymes introduced ethnographic methods to the study of language, emphasising the cultural and situational context of speech events. His SPEAKING model—setting, participants, ends, act sequence, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres—helped researchers analyze the deeper structure of real-world communication. Basil Bernstein, meanwhile, focused on how social class influences the kinds of language codes children acquire and how this affects their success in school. Sociolinguistic methods range widely. Researchers may conduct interviews, observe natural conversation, or analyze recordings. Some focus on dialect variation, mapping how pronunciation and grammar shift across regions. Others analyze how speakers switch between languages or dialects depending on context—a practice known as code-switching. Variationist sociolinguists use quantitative methods to chart patterns in large data sets, while discourse analysts look closely at how meaning unfolds turn by turn in interaction. One of the core ideas in sociolinguistics is that language reflects social structures but also helps produce them. For example, the way someone speaks can reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. A working-class speaker may adopt standard grammar to signal authority in a job interview, or they may use regional slang to assert solidarity within their community. These choices are not random—they are shaped by complex social dynamics and personal aspirations. Another key concept is prestige. Some language forms carry overt prestige—widely recognised as 'correct' or 'educated'. Others hold covert prestige—valued within communities but stigmatised by outsiders. The way people shift between these forms reveals a lot about power, belonging, and resistance. Sociolinguistics continues to evolve. Today, researchers study online communities, multilingual cities, and transnational movements. The central insight remains language is social. Every time someone speaks, they are doing more than sharing information. They are positioning themselves, shaping relationships, and participating in the ongoing construction of society.

Social life of language

Language is not just a tool for communication—it is woven into the fabric of social life. In 'The Social Life of Language[87]', Gillian Sankoff shows how language reflects and reshapes human relationships, identities, and power structures. What sets her work apart is not only the depth of her fieldwork, but also the way she combines statistical methods with anthropological insight. Language, in her view, is always lived, always local, and always changing. Sankoff's research draws on examples from two strikingly different contexts: the city of Montréal and the small communities of Papua New Guinea. In both, she studies how languages evolve under pressure—whether from colonisation, migration, or the search for status. Her work is not confined to a single method. She uses ethnographic interviews, long-term participant observation, and quantitative analysis of speech data. Yet she does not treat variation as noise. She sees it as the very thing that gives language life. One of the book's central ideas is that language change happens through 'micro-evolution'. That is, not through sweeping historical shifts alone, but through daily choices made by speakers. These choices are not random. They

[86] Labov, W. (1972) Sociolinguistic Patterns. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[87] Sankoff, G. (1980) The Social Life of Language. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

respond to context, relationships, and intention. A speaker may change their pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar not because they forget a rule, but because they are signalling something—solidarity, authority, distance, or closeness. Language becomes a tool for social navigation. Sankoff is particularly interested in the role of style. People do not just speak; they style themselves through language. This connects her work to classical rhetoric, especially Kenneth Burke's idea of identification—how people use language to align with others or to set themselves apart. These stylistic choices are not superficial. They are shaped by deeper political, cultural, and historical forces. Her studies in Montréal, for instance, show how French speakers shift between more 'standard' and more 'vernacular' forms of speech depending on audience and setting. This is not just about grammar. It is about identity, belonging, and sometimes resistance. Language here becomes a field of negotiation. In a city where French is both the dominant local language and a marker of cultural survival, these small shifts carry weight. In Papua New Guinea, she examines Tok Pisin, a former pidgin that has become a national language. This transition, she argues, reveals how new languages emerge not just from mixing vocabulary but from people making meaning in new social arrangements. Language is not a fixed system. It adapts, stretches, and sometimes reinvents itself in response to need. What makes Sankoff's work powerful is her refusal to separate language from the people who speak it. She does not treat language as an abstract object. Instead, she listens—closely—to how people speak, why they speak that way, and what those choices reveal about their place in the world. In doing so, she offers a model for sociolinguistics that is grounded, humane, and responsive to the complexity of lived experience.

The old man and the letter

In a small Gambian village, an elderly man sits with a younger neighbour, a pen in hand and words on the tip of his tongue. He cannot write, but he has something to say. With the help of the younger man, he crafts a letter—a formal request to help arrange a marriage. This moment, seemingly ordinary, becomes the centre of Kasper Juffermans' study in 'The Old Man and the Letter[88]'. It offers a window into how language and literacy are lived and shared in a multilingual, postcolonial society. The man, Ba-Abdoulie, is illiterate. He speaks Fula, Mandinka, and a bit of Arabic, but cannot write in any language. His stepson, Lamin, educated in English, needs help. A dowry must be arranged, and to do that, a letter must be sent. But in The Gambia, formal requests must be written in English. Not because English fits the message best, but because it holds the most power. English is the language of the state, of institutions, of doing things 'properly'. Even in rural spaces, it dominates the written word. Buba, a literate young man in the village, agrees to write the letter. Ba-Abdoulie dictates. Buba writes. Lamin's mother listens. The letter passes between hands, between oral and written, between languages. It is written twice—first drafted, then copied neatly. The letter itself is never fully seen, but its role is clear: it moves people, connects them, and reflects a web of relationships. This event is not just about writing. It is about languaging—the process of using language to navigate social life. Juffermans moves away from seeing languages as fixed systems and instead focuses on how people use whatever linguistic tools they must achieve their goals. In this village, everyone mixes languages. They switch between Mandinka, Fula, English, and Arabic, depending on who they are with and what they need. This is not confusion; it is skilful communication. It reflects what scholars call 'polylingual languaging'—drawing from a broad repertoire of language features to meet the demands of the moment. Literacy here is also not an individual

[88] Juffermans, K. (2015) 'The Old Man and the Letter: Literacy and Languaging in a Modern Multiethnic Gambian Village', Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies, 123.

skill. It is a social practice. When Ba-Abdoulie needs to write, he does not see his illiteracy as a barrier. He finds someone who can help. Writing becomes a shared act, involving many voices, shaped by oral memory, social roles, and cultural values. It challenges the Western idea of literacy as solitary and uniform. What emerges from Juffermans' account is a view of language and literacy as deeply human activities—messy, hybrid, adaptive, and always rooted in place. The letter might be written in English, but its heart is in Fula and Mandinka. Its grammar may follow school rules, but its meaning is grounded in relationships, family duty, and village life. This single act of writing tells a larger story about power, access, and the ways people continue to make meaning, even when they lack the tools that others take for granted.

Cultural politics of English

English is everywhere. From international diplomacy to pop music, from school textbooks to protest slogans, it has become the language that appears to speak for the world. But this global reach is not neutral. In 'The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language[89]', Alastair Pennycook argues that the spread of English cannot be separated from the histories of colonialism, capitalism, and global inequality. Pennycook begins with a stark contrast. One moment, the voice of a UN official welcomes alien life in English on the Voyager spacecraft. The next, a South African protest song echoes through a township, telling a story of dispossession in English. These scenes reveal two faces of the same language: one polished, official, and global; the other wounded, local, and contested. English, in this view, is not just a tool—it is a terrain of struggle. The idea that English is spreading 'naturally' or 'usefully' is, Pennycook argues, a myth. Behind its rise lie deep political forces. English has grown with empire, trade, media, and education systems designed to serve global capitalism. In many places, access to English means access to jobs, higher education, and social prestige. But this access is not equal. In postcolonial societies—from India to Kenya to Malaysia—English often divides rather than connects. It marks who belongs to the elite and who does not. Even where English is used fluently, it often carries the weight of someone else's values. To speak English fluently is often to be heard more clearly, but not necessarily to be understood. Pennycook insists that applied linguists and language educators must confront this fact. Teaching English, he argues, is not just a linguistic act—it is a political one. Whether in Hong Kong or Soweto, to teach English is to participate in global systems of inclusion and exclusion. Yet English is not only a tool of power. It can also be turned around. People in postcolonial societies use English in unexpected ways—to resist, to rewrite, to reclaim. In South Africa, 'People's English' became a language of protest. In Malaysia, the rise of Cantonese popular culture offers a counterweight to English. These are not just forms of cultural resistance—they are reminders that language is always being made anew. Pennycook's book calls for a different kind of engagement with English. Not just teaching grammar or pronunciation, but asking hard questions: Who benefits from English? Who is left out? How do we teach language without reproducing the very inequalities we might wish to challenge? To see English only as a bridge between nations misses the point. It is also a wall, a gate, a currency, a weapon. And for some, it is a language they were forced to learn, one they have since made their own. The politics of English, then, are not abstract—they are lived, contested, and unfolding every day.

[89] Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

Worldliness of English

English is not just a language. It is a way of living in the world. In 'The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language', Alastair Pennycook argues that the global spread of English cannot be understood without addressing its entanglement with culture, power, and history. This is not a simple matter of counting speakers or mapping dialects. It is about how English becomes part of people's lives—shaping how they think, what they value, and who they become. Too often, linguistics treats language as a sealed system. Words are studied without asking where they come from or how they are used. But people do not speak in isolation. They speak to others, in particular places, with stakes. Fanon once wrote that to speak a language is to carry a culture and a civilisation. Pennycook extends this idea: when someone speaks English, they do not just borrow words—they borrow ways of being. English is full of contradictions. It opens doors but also erects walls. In schools, courts, and media across the world, English offers access to power. But that access is uneven. Some speak it with ease. Others struggle. And often, the version of English that counts is not local, but modelled on Western norms. What appears as 'standard' hides systems of inequality. The idea of English as a neutral tool is seductive. But it is also dangerous. Pennycook warns against seeing English as simply helpful or efficient. That view ignores the histories of colonialism and empire that enabled its rise. It also ignores how English continues to shape global hierarchies today. Whether in Hong Kong classrooms or African parliaments, English is not just learnt—it is imposed, expected, and often demanded. This does not mean that English only dominates. It can also be resisted. In many places, people have reworked the language to express their own stories. English becomes protest. It becomes irony. It becomes local. But even this resistance shows how deeply English is embedded in global life. Pennycook is critical of the way linguistics separates language from its surroundings. Terms like 'sociolinguistics' or 'applied linguistics' often serve to sideline the political. He draws on Edward Said's idea of 'worldliness'—of treating texts, and languages, as things in the world. Not abstractions, but part of real lives, shaped by real forces. To speak English, then, is not a neutral act. It involves choices, histories, and consequences. It places one within systems of meaning that stretch across borders. English does not float freely. It lands in places already marked by inequality. Understanding English means seeing it in context. Not just grammatical context, but social and political context. Its spread reflects a world order. Its dominance sustains that order. If we are to teach, use, or study English ethically, we must first acknowledge its worldliness.

Discourse and dependency

The idea of English as a global language often carries with it a quiet optimism. It is praised as the language of progress, mobility, and international understanding. But this view hides more than it reveals. In 'The Cultural Politics of English' Alastair Pennycook argues that global English is not a neutral vehicle of communication. It is shaped by power, history, and discourse—and it shapes them in return. To understand what 'international' really means, one must look closely at how the world is ordered. The claim that the world is getting smaller, repeated in slogans and media narratives, suggests a shared global space. But in truth, global connectivity moves along very uneven lines. People in the global North travel more easily, control more media, and speak more languages with privilege. English dominates not by accident, but by design. It is the voice of global corporations, of elite education, and of international diplomacy. But whose voice is it, really? Organisations like TESOL promote the idea of a global English-speaking community. Yet their conferences, structures, and policies often reflect the interests of wealthy, English-speaking countries. The phrase 'designing our

world' used by TESOL in 1993, for example, raises urgent questions: Who is designing? Who is excluded? For whom is this 'our'? Dependency theory helps frame these questions. It explains how developing countries remain reliant on wealthier nations, not only economically but also through education and media. Schools often teach Western norms, and media systems replicate Western ideologies. Education becomes less a path to independence and more a tool of continued dependency. Within this framework, English is not just a skill but a sign of alignment with dominant values. Crucially, Pennycook calls for a shift away from deterministic accounts that see English as only a force of domination. While acknowledging English's role in perpetuating inequality, he emphasises human agency. People resist, repurpose, and reshape the language. In postcolonial contexts like cricket, English becomes both a tool of the empire and a site of resistance. The sport, like the language, carries layers of colonial meaning—but it also becomes a stage for cultural self-expression, defiance, and reclamation. To speak English is to enter a contested space. It is to draw on a system of discourse that carries power—but also to bend it, twist it, and make it say something new. Language is not static. It moves through people and places. It is formed by the struggles of its speakers, not just the structures of institutions. English is worldly not only because it is spoken across the globe, but because it is entangled in the cultural and political struggles that define our era.

Sociology of language

Language is not only a system of words and rules—it is also a deeply social practice. In 'Readings in the Sociology of Language[90]', Joshua A. Fishman explains how language and society co-vary, shaping one another in systematic ways. While linguists have studied the structural variations between languages and sociologists have analysed the patterns of social behaviour, there has been a surprising lack of attention to the ways these two areas intersect. The sociology of language seeks to fill this gap by showing how social groups influence language use, and how language, in turn, reflects social dynamics. Languages vary by region, class, and formality. One may speak Boston English or New York English, each tied to a place. But even within those, people from different classes speak differently. The same person might speak more formally at work and more casually with friends. These shifts are not random. They follow patterns tied to social identity and social structure. What seems like 'just talking' is shaped by context, audience, and social expectations. Societies, too, have their own structures—dyads, families, peer groups, institutions, nations. People relate to one another through patterns of power, status, and roles. And in all these relationships, language serves as the main medium of communication. Therefore, if language patterns shift when social settings shift, it makes sense to study both together. Fishman argues that language behaviour must ultimately be understood in relation to society. That is why he prefers the term 'sociology of language' over 'sociolinguistics'. Sociolinguistics often focuses narrowly on how social variables affect language use. In contrast, the sociology of language starts from society and examines how language operates within its structures. Society is not a backdrop; it is the context in which language happens. The field is still developing. Early work borrows tools from both linguistics and sociology, but over time, it promises to become a distinct field with its own questions and methods. Part of what holds it back is the traditional separation between the disciplines. Linguistics, especially in the American tradition, has focused on formal grammar and abstract structures. Sociology, on the other hand, often avoids language and focuses more on large-scale data about institutions and behaviours. But things are changing. Sociology has grown more interested in small-group interaction and the role of language in shaping identity and social

[90] Fishman, J.A. (1972) Readings in the Sociology of Language. The Hague: Mouton.

order. Issues like multilingualism, language shift, and language maintenance—once peripheral—are becoming central. Linguistics also benefits from this shift. It can no longer ignore that what looks like random variation in speech often reflects deeper social patterns. A speaker's age, ethnicity, religion, or class can all affect how they speak, when they speak, and what they mean. Language communities—groups of people who identify with a particular language—are defined by more than just linguistic forms. They involve shared norms, values, and histories. Some communities share a standard language but use different dialects. Others develop new forms through contact with other languages. These interactions often produce bilingualism, and in some cases, entirely new languages, such as pidgins or creoles. Language also shifts depending on the situation. A speaker might use one register at home, another in school, and a third at work. Registers are varieties of language tied to specific settings. They are shaped by expectations, roles, and goals. Understanding registers helps clarify how language functions in daily life. Ultimately, the sociology of language opens a fuller view of communication. It moves beyond abstract rules and explores how language reflects and reinforces social order. This approach provides insights into identity, power, inequality, and change—making language not just a tool for communication, but a mirror of society itself.

Sharing, talking, and giving

In her study 'Sharing, Talking, and Giving[91]' of the Kung Bushmen of the Nyae Nyae region, Lorna Marshall explores how this small-scale society manages to avoid hostility and maintain peace through a delicate balance of customs, habits, and verbal practices. Though the Kung are not especially altruistic by nature, their need for one another makes mutual tolerance essential. Solitary life is not an option; survival depends on band membership, shared resources, and emotional closeness. Families live in close quarters, often sitting and sleeping side by side. Belonging is the only real form of security. This intimacy does not come without tension. The /Kung are watchful and cautious. Generosity is limited and mostly confined to close relatives—parents and children, spouses, siblings. Outside of that circle, help is not guaranteed. Marshall observed moments of indifference, even cruelty, when the sick or dying were ignored. Still, the threat of conflict hangs over these close relations. Poisoned arrows are never far from reach, and disputes, though rare, can turn violent. Because of this, the Kung have developed ways to defuse anger before it erupts. Talking is the key. Everyday conversation among the Kung is constant, a low hum of speech, laughter, and storytelling that fills the werf. This talk is not idle chatter; it is a vital social glue. People speak about food, hunting, gathering, and—especially—gift-giving. Gifts are a form of social accounting. Who gave what, when, and to whom matters deeply. Failures to reciprocate are noticed and talked about. A good giver is respected; a poor one may be quietly criticised as incompetent or selfish. While ordinary talk sustains social life, the Kung also have more intense forms of verbal exchange. One is the 'talk', an informal but emotionally charged meeting that erupts when there is serious disagreement. Marshall recounts a case in 1952, when a dispute over gift-giving led to shouting, accusations, and factionalism. In the end, the tension was resolved not by force, but through more talk—and eventually, the right gift. These 'talks' serve a judicial function, making collective grievance public and giving the group a way to regulate itself. Another form of speech is the 'shout'. This happens during accidents or crises—often loud, anguished, almost explosive. When two shelters burnt down due to children playing with fire, the community responded with this kind of speech: unfiltered, emotional, and cathartic. Shouting allows the group to vent without turning anger on each other.

[91] Marshall, L. (1961) 'Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among /Kung Bushmen', in Africa, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 231–249.

There is also repetitive speech, used when someone feels neglected or anxious, especially around food. A woman might repeat that she has not eaten or been given enough. It is not a plea for conversation, but a release of internal pressure. These patterns of speech—casual, confrontational, emotional, or obsessive—help manage tension. By externalising conflict, they prevent it from festering. What Marshall found was not a peaceful society by nature, but a community that had developed specific tools—gift exchange and constant communication—to handle its own fragility. Speech, in its many forms, becomes a system of relief, a kind of valve that lets pressure escape before it turns to harm.

Social structure and language

Philip K. Bock's 'Social Structure and Language Structure[92]' is an exploration of the parallels between language and social systems. It opens an important path in anthropological thinking. His aim is not to repeat Whorf's focus on how language reflects cultural values, but to treat language and social behaviour as structured systems within a broader cultural framework. Both can be analysed in terms of their parts, their internal rules, and how they interact with their surroundings. Bock begins by defining cultural forms as shared expectations or understandings that influence behaviour. Language is one such form—its rules and categories are learnt, shared, and unconsciously followed. The way people know which words or forms to use mirrors how they know what behaviour fits a social role. Linguistic units, like morphemes, are shaped by internal rules and external contexts. Similarly, roles like 'teacher' or 'parent' have expected behaviours that change depending on time, place, and the other roles involved. A core insight here is that individual behaviours or words are meaningless alone. They gain sense from the structure they belong to. A sound only becomes a phoneme in a language because of contrast and pattern. A gesture or task only defines a role when placed in a larger web of expectations. This leads Bock to compare morphemes with social roles: both have variants (like allomorphs or role adaptations), and both take on meaning depending on context. Consider a teacher. The expectations for how they act shift depending on whether they are with students, peers, or a principal. These variations echo how a word changes form depending on grammar or pronunciation rules. Just as a morpheme's shape adjusts in different environments, a social role flexes depending on who is presenting what is happening. Time and space also matter. Bock introduces the idea of the 'situation-matrix' to map out how roles, spaces, and periods align. A classroom, for example, is not just a place. It is a structured situation where certain times (class periods) and spaces (seating arrangements, the front of the room) cue particular behaviours. These patterns help define who does what, where, and when. The situation becomes a kind of grammar for social behaviour. He illustrates this with the Micmac Indian wake. This event has a clear structure: specific roles (mourners, speakers), defined spaces (where people sit, the location of the body), and a sequence in time (from death to burial). Rather than analysing its meaning, Bock charts its form. Like a linguist analysing syntax, he shows how people follow an unspoken system of cultural cues to know how to behave. In both language and social life, structure is what allows shared understanding. The analogy between the two is not just metaphorical. It helps reveal the deep, often invisible, organisation behind everyday life.

[92] Bock, P.K. (1964) 'Social Structure and Language Structure', in American Anthropologist, 66(6), pp. 1325–1341.

Directions in sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics as a discipline took shape out of dissatisfaction with traditional linguistic approaches that ignored the social contexts of language. Instead of treating language as an abstract system detached from its users, sociolinguistics asks how language functions in people's everyday lives. In 'Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication[93]', edited by John J. Gumperz, this shift in orientation becomes clear: language is no longer seen merely as form but as patterned social behaviour shaped by context and culture. Gumperz and Dell Hymes argue that to understand language, one must examine how people use it in real situations, and how this use reflects broader social structures and relationships. Their volume helped define the field by insisting that linguistics must move beyond syntax and phonology and into the real, messy world of speech. The early chapters trace the historical background of sociolinguistics. Scholars once focused on extinct languages or literary texts, treating language like a biological organism that evolved in isolation. The aim was to reconstruct language families and trace their development. But this left out the living, changing practices of people using language. Others shifted attention to local dialects, trekking into rural communities to collect speech samples, yet even these efforts often treated language change as a mechanical, law-like process, not a human one shaped by migration, conquest, or interaction. The emergence of descriptive linguistics and later generative grammar made language seem even more internal and abstract. Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between langue (the shared system) and parole (individual speech acts) helped linguists separate structure from use. But this division also risked severing language from its speakers. Chomsky's generative grammar focused on the mental rules behind sentence formation, emphasising a universal capacity for language rather than the social conditions in which speech takes place. For many sociolinguists, this was a step in the wrong direction. What Gumperz and Hymes introduced instead was an ethnographic lens—a way of looking at language as a cultural activity governed by tacit rules and social norms. The central idea was that speech communities develop their own systems of meaning, often invisible to outsiders. Hymes coined the phrase 'ethnography of speaking' to describe this research method. It involves watching how people talk, where they talk, with whom, and under what expectations. What counts as appropriate or meaningful speech depends on those local norms. Rather than viewing language as one standard system with minor local variations, sociolinguists began to explore how speakers shift styles, codes, and registers depending on the context. This became especially important in multilingual and multiethnic communities, where people navigate several languages or dialects daily. In such settings, language becomes a resource for signalling identity, belonging, or resistance. Labov's work in New York City, for example, showed how class and ethnicity shaped the pronunciation of certain sounds. Middle-class speakers altered their speech in more 'prestigious' settings, while others maintained vernacular forms tied to community identity. These variations were not random; they reflected patterns of power, aspiration, and cultural affiliation. Hymes insisted that sociolinguistics must study 'rules of speaking'—the unwritten codes that guide when to speak, how much to say, what tone to use, and what language to choose. These rules differ widely between communities. What counts as polite, assertive, or disrespectful speech is not universal. One group's silence may be another's insult. Finally, Gumperz and his collaborators argued that understanding language use requires fieldwork. You cannot learn about real communication in a laboratory or from written texts alone. You must go where people live, talk, argue, joke, and perform their identities. This is why sociolinguistics places the speech

[93] Gumperz, J.J. (ed.) (1982) Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication. Oxford: Blackwell.

community—not the abstract language system—at the centre of its inquiries. By weaving together anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, 'Directions in Sociolinguistics' laid the groundwork for a dynamic view of language. It taught that language is not just a tool for expressing ideas but a medium for organising social life. It changes with relationships, adapts to power structures, and helps construct the very communities that use it.

5.3. Applied Linguistics

(Speaking practice: From grammar to global power)

'To language is to live meaning—not merely to describe it, but to co-construct it in the flesh of the moment'.

— Alastair Pennycook, Language as a Local Practice

Pronouns of power and solidarity

Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's essay 'The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity[94]' traces how forms of address reflect social relationships. Their focus is on the use of pronouns in European languages—how speakers choose between formal and informal second-person pronouns, and what that choice reveals about social order. The history begins with Latin, where tu was singular and familiar, while vos was plural. Over time, vos came to be used as a singular pronoun of respect, first for Roman emperors, then gradually in broader aristocratic and clerical circles. This shift framed the plural as a linguistic marker of elevated status. The practice spread through Europe, evolving into distinctions like tu/vous in French, du/Sie in German, and tú/usted in Spanish. The choice between these forms has rarely been neutral. It reflects a balance—or imbalance—between power and intimacy. One can speak down with tu, and up with vous. In traditional hierarchies, nobles addressed commoners with the informal, while expecting deference in return. The same applied in families, schools, and churches: superiors spoke informally; inferiors responded formally. This asymmetry forms what Brown and Gilman call the 'power semantic'. The relationship determines the pronoun, not the emotional bond. A bishop and a peasant might never share solidarity, but the bishop uses tu while receiving vous. Power, not friendship, governs their speech. But another axis of meaning appears—solidarity. Here, the relationship is equal, based on closeness or shared identity. When two friends use tu with one another, it signals mutual familiarity. Solidarity is marked by reciprocal pronoun use, not hierarchical distinction. You use tu if I do. Our equality is linguistic. Brown and Gilman show that pronoun systems balance both power and solidarity. Sometimes one dominates. In a rigid monarchy, power matters most. In modern democracies or among peers, solidarity may take over. The French Revolution, for example, sought to eliminate feudal address altogether. Radicals condemned vous as aristocratic and imposed tu as the egalitarian default. The Quakers did something similar in England, using thou universally to level social differences. Pronouns also express group style. Conservative groups tend to retain formality; radicals break it. In literature and politics, writers have chosen pronouns deliberately to express class, intimacy, or dissent. After World War II, there was a marked shift in many countries away from rigid forms of address. Egalitarianism became the new norm. In offices, homes, and schools, tu and its equivalents gained ground. But the tension remains. A single pronoun can mean welcome or

[94] Brown, R. and Gilman, A. (1960) 'The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity', in Style in Language, edited by T. A. Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 253–276.

disrespect, depending on who uses it. In today's multilingual, multicultural societies, the choice of address still carries weight. It may signal inclusion, distance, resistance, or hierarchy. The simple act of choosing a word—just one word—can capture the entire structure of a relationship.

Linguistic communities

John J. Gumperz explores how language structure reflects and interacts with the structure of society. In his essay 'Types of Linguistic Communities[95]', he questions the traditional division between linguistic and anthropological analysis. Linguists often focus on the structure of a single language, while anthropologists study specific communities. This disconnection, he argues, limits our understanding of how language works in social life. For instance, when linguists speak of 'English', they often mean an abstract system. But English includes many forms: rural dialects in Britain, urban slang in the U.S., creoles in Africa, and pidgins in Asia. Treating these as a single language ignores the wide variation found in everyday speech. Linguists have historically treated stylistic variation or borrowed words as peripheral, not central. This perspective is useful for typology or historical linguistics but less so for understanding how people use language in society. Gumperz advocates moving away from this monolithic view. Language should be seen as a network of overlapping codes, each shaped by social interaction. He draws on Jakobson's idea of multiple 'subcodes' within a language. Just as societies are composed of interacting institutions and roles, languages are composed of interacting registers, dialects, and languages. Complexity, in both cases, lies in the relationships between parts—not in internal unity. Traditionally, sociolinguistics focused on how languages evolve over time. Sapir, for example, emphasised 'drift'—internal linguistic change—over external social forces. Gumperz challenges this. He draws on Boas and Emeneau, who studied how neighbouring languages influence one another. Their work shows that shared geography and culture often shape how languages borrow, adapt, and evolve. Gumperz shifts the focus toward linguistic communities. These are not defined by a single language but by social patterns of interaction. A linguistic community may be monolingual or multilingual. Its boundaries are not always geographic. In many urban and immigrant settings, people move between multiple linguistic worlds. Speech communities overlap, and individuals often shift codes depending on who they are talking to. To describe this, Gumperz uses the concept of the 'communication matrix'. This includes the social roles people play (like teacher or priest), the settings they move through, and the speech codes attached to each role. These roles come with expected behaviours and forms of speech—what he calls 'diacritics'. The speech codes themselves form a 'code matrix', which might include dialects, specialised jargon, or different languages altogether. In tribal or rural societies, people may switch between a local dialect and a regional language, depending on the setting. In caste-based societies, language often reflects rank—elites use 'high' forms for ceremony, while the majority speak 'low' forms in daily life. Intermediate societies, with more economic and occupational variety, show even more linguistic complexity. Urban centres, by contrast, often push toward linguistic uniformity. Dialects merge, and role-specific language gives way to general stylistic variation. Gumperz concludes that linguistic communities are not static. They evolve as societies change. By studying these communities, scholars can better understand how language operates in the real world—not as an abstract system, but as a living social practice.

[95] Gumperz, J.J. (1968) 'Types of Linguistic Communities', in Readings in the Sociology of Language, edited by J.A. Fishman. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 460–472.

Posthumanist applied linguistics

In 'Posthumanist Applied Linguistics[96]', Alastair Pennycook proposes a radical rethinking of language through the lens of posthumanism. He begins by questioning the very idea of 'the human' as the central figure in language and meaning-making. The book opens with a sharp awareness of contemporary global crises—refugee displacement, rising nationalism, economic inequality—and asks whether the idea of a unified human subject still offers meaningful solutions. While human rights and liberal democracy remain guiding ideals, they are often contradicted by ongoing human destructiveness. Pennycook suggests that it might be time to step outside the human-centred view and reimagine our relationship with the world. Posthumanism, he argues, is not about rejecting humanity but about questioning the supremacy of humans in thought and politics. It asks what happens when humans are seen not as isolated agents but as entangled with animals, machines, environments, and other non-human actors. This is especially relevant for applied linguistics, a field historically rooted in humanist ideals. Language has long been seen as a uniquely human capacity, a tool for rational thought and individual expression. But this view now seems limited. If humans are not autonomous, self-contained subjects, then neither is language. Pennycook points to distributed cognition theories—like those of Hutchins and Clark—which show how thinking does not just happen in the head. It happens in the body, in tools, and in spaces. A scuba diver navigating underwater does not rely only on memory or instinct. They use maps, environmental cues, and bodily sensations. These distributed processes challenge the idea of the mind as an internal, sealed system. Language, like thought, must be seen as something extended and embedded in the world. Applied linguistics can draw on this insight. Rather than focusing only on individual language competence or formal grammar, posthumanist applied linguistics sees language as part of a broader ecology. Words, gestures, technologies, environments, and even objects—like menus or zucchinis at a market—become agents in the production of meaning. This leads to a view of language as a 'semiotic assemblage': a network of signs, bodies, and materials that together create communication. This also transforms how researchers think about repertoires. Traditional sociolinguistics defines a linguistic repertoire as the range of styles or dialects an individual can use. But Pennycook and Otsuji suggest that repertoires should be understood spatially and socially. In a kitchen, for instance, communication happens not just through speech but through smells, gestures, tools, and timing. These are not background conditions—they are part of the language event itself. Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentrism at the heart of linguistic theory. It argues that human language does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by and shapes the material world. This includes non-human animals, physical tools, technological systems, and environmental constraints. The Anthropocene—a term for our current age of human-caused planetary change—makes this even clearer. If humans have reshaped the Earth's geology, climate, and ecosystems, then language must also be seen as implicated in these transformations. Importantly, posthumanist applied linguistics is not just theoretical. It has consequences for education, policy, and ethics. It calls for new ways of teaching language that acknowledge material realities, environmental crises, and technological mediations. It asks educators and researchers to move beyond models of isolated subjects and toward relational, ecological, and embodied understandings of communication. By shifting the focus from the autonomous human subject to networks of humans and non-humans, posthumanist applied linguistics invites a deeper, more situated understanding of language. It asks us to consider how language emerges not from individual minds, but from the interplay of

[96] Pennycook, A. (2021) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

bodies, spaces, tools, and meanings. In doing so, it redefines what it means to speak, learn, and think in a changing world.

Mutual misunderstanding

Language is often seen as a bridge between minds. It is assumed that people speak to be understood, and that understanding happens when both parties use the same language. In applied linguistics, this belief has shaped how researchers approach multilingualism, communication, and English as a lingua franca. Barbara Seidlhofer, for example, argues that users of a global English tend to adapt their language use consciously to achieve mutual intelligibility—even without shared native norms. The goal, it seems, is always understanding. But what if understanding is not the whole story? What if miscommunication reveals more about language than agreement ever could? In 'Posthumanist Applied Linguistics' Alastair Pennycook questions the assumption that communication always leads to mutual comprehension. Instead of viewing misunderstanding as a breakdown, he sees it as a natural part of interaction. Language is not simply a neutral tool for transmitting ideas; it is embedded in social and political contexts, shaped by power, inequality, and difference. Shared language does not guarantee shared meaning. People negotiate, improvise, and misunderstand constantly. These are not failures—they are how communication happens. Traditional models imagine language as a closed system: fixed meanings, shared rules, clear exchanges. But language in use is messier. It crosses boundaries. It flows between tongues. It adapts to space, time, and body. Pennycook introduces the idea of semiotic assemblages—language as one element in a mix that includes gesture, material objects, and social context. A menu, a hand signal, a mispronounced word—all shape how meaning is made. This shift reflects a posthumanist turn in linguistics. It moves beyond the view of language as a human-centred system of signs. Instead, it sees meaning as emerging through interaction with other people, places, and things. In a busy kitchen or a street market, language is not just in the head—it is in the space, the rhythm, the objects around you. A rotting zucchini or a steaming plate may speak as loudly as words. Posthumanist linguistics challenges the fantasy of perfect communication. It asks not how humans master language, but how language happens among humans, animals, machines, and environments. Mutual understanding is no longer the aim. Instead, the focus shifts to alignment and attunement—how people adjust to each other and to the situation. Meaning arises not from shared code, but from shared attention, shared action, and shared space. Rather than lamenting the collapse of shared norms, posthumanist linguistics embraces the noise. It recognises misunderstanding, improvisation, and ambiguity as part of communication. It breaks down the idea of language as a human monopoly, and opens the door to new ways of thinking, speaking, and being—with and beyond words.

Language in a globalised world

In a globalised world, language no longer moves only with geography—it travels with people, ideas, and power. In 'Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact[97]', Khawla Badwan argues that language is not just a neutral tool of communication but a dynamic site of inequality, identity, and resistance. The global spread of English is a prime example: its rise has less to do with its linguistic qualities and more to do with colonial history, economic power, and political influence. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the linguistic market is key to understanding how language operates under capitalism. Language,

[97] Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

he argued, acquires value not because of its structure but because of the social status of its speakers. A language is worth what its speakers are worth. This means that languages linked to powerful nations—like English or French—are given higher value, while others—such as Wolof or Welsh—are treated as marginal or even 'pointless'. These values are not fixed; they shift with global trends, economic shifts, and ideological regimes. But they always reflect who has the power to speak and be heard. Globalisation intensifies this uneven terrain. English becomes a passport, a currency of mobility. It is marketed as a path to jobs, education, and social mobility. In many countries, people invest time and money into acquiring it, hoping to access the global stage. But the market is not open to all. Those who cannot speak English fluently, or who speak it with the 'wrong' accent, often find themselves excluded or devalued. This is not just about language proficiency—it is about race, class, nationality, and history. Badwan urges a more human approach. Language is not only economic capital. It is how people grow, connect, and belong. Children learning their mother tongue are not investing in the market; they are building a sense of self. Language can bring joy, intimacy, memory. It can also carry trauma, shame, and exclusion. A son struggling to speak his grandfather's language over Skype during lockdown is not thinking about employability he is trying to say 'I love you' in a language that carries emotional weight. Neoliberal ideology reduces language to a product—something to buy, sell, and rank. It creates hierarchies of 'useful' and 'useless' languages, stripping away their cultural and emotional life. Badwan resists this logic. She shows that language is also therapy, resistance, and love. During COVID-19, her home was filled with Arabic, not because it added market value, but because it reconnected her children to their heritage. Yet even in moments of beauty, language remains political. A neighbour finds comfort in Hindi songs. Another family is judged for speaking a 'foreign' tongue. These interactions reveal that language is never just personal—it is shaped by policies, prejudices, and histories. To speak of language today is to speak of the world: unequal, mobile, fragmented, yet still filled with the potential for connection. The challenge is to protect this human side of language from being drowned in the noise of profit and power.

Language and identity

In the world of today, language and identity no longer sit neatly within national borders. The idea of 'one language, one nation' still dominates public discourse, but everyday experience tells a more complex story. In 'Language in a Globalised World', Khawla Badwan argues that language is not a static system, but a fluid, relational, and emotional practice that deeply shapes and reflects identity. Traditional definitions of language—like those found in dictionaries—tend to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and national affiliation. They treat language as a closed system, bound to a people, a flag, a territory. But this view conceals the diversity and instability of actual language practices. In classrooms, homes, streets, and online spaces, people blend languages, switch codes, and speak in ways that do not fit textbook rules. Yet institutions often ignore this messiness. They privilege 'standard' languages, marginalising dialects, accents, and mixed forms. Language becomes a gatekeeper of legitimacy. This gatekeeping extends to identity. Who belongs? Who is seen as fluent, articulate, and intelligent? These judgments are made through language. An accent can mark someone as foreign. A dialect can mark someone as uneducated. A child refusing to speak their home language at school may already feel that it is a liability, not an asset. Language does not just express identity—it can repress or disfigure it, depending on which language, and where. Badwan shows how neoliberal ideologies shape these hierarchies. Languages are ranked by market value. English is celebrated for its 'utility' and global reach, while other languages are reduced to cultural tokens or obstacles. A child may be praised for speaking French but shamed for speaking Somali. This reflects not linguistic

reality but global power structures. Languages of empire, trade, and academia are celebrated. Others are erased or exoticised. But identity is not fixed. It shifts across contexts. Edward Said described the strangeness of living between two languages and two worlds. For him, bilingualism was not a technical skill—it was a dissonant experience that shaped how he saw himself. Speaking one language often meant leaving another behind. Badwan recounts a similar tension when her child told her not to speak Arabic at school. The child was not being cruel; he was adapting. He had already sensed that Arabic did not belong there. In trying to belong, he pushed part of himself—and his mother—aside. Language is where such conflicts play out. Yet it is also where healing begins. Badwan describes walking in Germany and hearing an Arabic song by Fairouz. In that moment, she was no longer an academic, a migrant, or a UK citizen. She was a daughter, a listener, someone momentarily held by sound and memory. This is the power of languaging: it opens identity spaces beyond the roles imposed by society. Language is not just performance—it is presence. In her research with Tunisian students, Badwan found that languages carried emotional weight. Arabic connected students to family and faith. French carried both prestige and colonial history. English was a key to global futures but sometimes felt alien. None of these languages stood alone. Together, they formed what one might call an identity repertoire—fluid, overlapping, and context-bound. To speak, then, is not just to communicate. It is to choose, to remember, to resist, and to belong. Language in a globalised world is never neutral. It is a practice of becoming.

Global linguistic flows

Hip Hop is not just a music genre—it is a global conversation. In 'Global Linguistic Flows[98]', H. Samy Alim and Awad Ibrahim explore how Hip-Hop travels across borders, languages, and identities, becoming a powerful space for linguistic innovation and cultural resistance. Alim frames this process through the idea of the cipha, a dynamic and improvisational exchange of rhymes, where artists do not just perform but engage in a deep linguistic and cultural dialogue. The cipha becomes a metaphor for the global circulation of ideas, sounds, and styles—a space where language is both art and politics. Alim shows that Hip Hop's language is never static. In a Shanghai rap battle, MCs switch between Mandarin, Shanghainese, and English, not to show off but to claim space, to be heard. Hip Hop in this context is not just imported from the U.S.—it is remade, revoiced, and reimagined by those who use it. This constant reinvention challenges the idea of cultural purity. Instead, Hip Hop becomes a site of métissage—a mixing of codes, styles, and histories. Awad Ibrahim develops this further. For him, Hip Hop is not only global, but also pedagogical. In his essay 'Takin' Hip Hop to a Whole Nother Level', Ibrahim introduces the idea of the 'Creative Margin Curriculum'. This is the education young people receive outside of school, through beats, rhymes, and resistance. It is what schools do not teach but what youth live and learn every day. Hip Hop becomes a form of knowledge—of naming one's condition, of building identity, and of imagining other futures. Ibrahim borrows from Édouard Glissant to describe this as vertical and horizontal métissage. Horizontal métissage is cultural borrowing across borders, like German or Japanese youth rapping in American styles. Vertical métissage, however, is deeper—it transforms dominant languages like English or French by filtering them through local accents, idioms, and experiences. Tanzanian artists blend Swahili and African American English to create 'raplish'. In doing so, they do not just imitate—they make something new, something rooted. Language in Hip Hop is never neutral. It is political. It signals identity, claims space,

[98] Alim, H. S., Ibrahim, A. and Pennycook, A. (2009) Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language. New York: Routledge.

mocks authority, or builds solidarity. Alim refers to this as the politics of language in the Global Hip Hop Nation—a transnational yet local community linked not by geography but by shared practices and struggles. Within it, linguistic choices carry weight. Codeswitching, slang, dialect—all of it becomes a performance of self and a confrontation with dominant ideologies of race, class, and belonging. Both Alim and Ibrahim emphasise affect. Hip Hop is about feeling. One MC says he felt like Tupac was speaking directly to him, even though they were separated by oceans and decades. That emotional resonance—recognition in a rhyme—is part of what gives Hip Hop its global power. Young people hear their own stories, pain, and hopes reflected in the lyrics. Through this identification, they become part of the culture, not as imitators, but as co-creators. In this way, Hip Hop becomes a form of 'world-making'. It does not just reflect reality—it remixes it. Ibrahim sees this as a challenge to formal education. Instead of ignoring the language and culture of youth, schools could learn from Hip Hop's pedagogy of affect, where identity and emotion are not distractions from learning but its starting point. 'Global Linguistic Flows' ultimately invites readers to rethink what counts as language, as learning, and as power. It reveals how Hip Hop serves as a global grammar of resistance and possibility. Language here is not just a tool—it is a weapon, a passport, a mirror, and a dance. It speaks across borders but also deep into the local. It connects São Paulo to Dakar, Berlin to Compton, without flattening their differences.

Critical applied linguistics

In 'Critical Applied Linguistics[99]', Alastair Pennycook revisits and redefines a field he helped shape over three decades ago. Much has changed since his early work in the 1990s. While core injustices remain—such as racism, poverty, and inequality—the world has shifted around them. Climate change, global migration, xenophobic populism, and economic precarity now frame how language and power must be understood. Applied linguistics, Pennycook argues, can no longer ignore these forces. It must face them directly, not just with analysis, but with active commitment to change. Critical applied linguistics (CALx) is more than a method; it is a political stance. It views language not as a neutral tool but as part of the structures that produce inequality. CALx asks how language policy, education, and discourse contribute to oppression—and how they might be reimagined toward justice. The book's revised edition reflects this, offering not just updates but a rethinking of what it means to be critical today. Pennycook responds to three key questions: Do critical concerns change over time? Are past critiques tied to their historical moment? And can critical work avoid being diluted? His answer is clear: CALx must evolve. New conditions—ecological collapse, digital surveillance, racial capitalism—demand fresh approaches. Yet some concerns endure, like colonial legacies in language teaching or the persistence of Eurocentric knowledge. The field itself has also changed. Raciolinguistics, queer linguistics, decolonial theory, and posthumanist perspectives have expanded what critique can mean. Pennycook does not adopt these uncritically. Instead, he welcomes their energy while urging reflection. What matters is not just novelty but whether a theory helps confront injustice. This edition aims to be more inclusive, less rigid, and more readable. It seeks clarity without sacrificing complexity. The book also tracks how global crises intersect with language. In 1990, Pennycook wrote about inequality, child mortality, and environmental degradation. Today, child deaths are down, but economic gaps have widened. Climate change threatens those least responsible for it. Displaced populations grow as borders harden. Neoliberalism—market logic applied to everything—has intensified insecurity. Critical

[99] Pennycook, A. (2001) Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

work must engage with these realities. Movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have brought new urgency to questions of race and gender in the field. Hashtags have become forms of political speech. Applied linguistics is being pushed to examine its own whiteness, its exclusions, and its complicities. Pennycook calls this a moment of radical hope—not blind optimism, but a commitment to imagine better futures even in crisis. Language is central to how power works in this world. From populist rhetoric to academic discourse, language shapes what can be seen, said, or silenced. CALx offers tools to resist. It reminds readers that critique is not enough. Action matters. Reflection must lead to engagement. The goal is not to master complexity for its own sake, but to use knowledge in the struggle for justice.

Politics of language

In 'Critical Applied Linguistics', Alastair Pennycook draws attention to how language is deeply tied to politics, power, and identity. He moves beyond the basic claim that 'language is political' to ask: how is it political? The focus shifts from theoretical assertions to practical questions about language policy, multilingualism, language rights, and the effects of global English. This chapter centres on the political treatment of language across societies, laying the groundwork for critical applied linguistics as a field rooted in social justice and transformation. One key issue Pennycook addresses is the global spread of English. While English is often presented as a neutral tool for global communication, it carries with it histories of colonialism and present-day inequalities. Some celebrate the rise of English, suggesting it promotes efficiency and shared understanding. Others see this celebration as masking the dominance of English over other languages, especially in education and academia. Pennycook critiques this 'colonial celebratory' view, arguing that English often replaces or marginalises local languages and ways of knowing. More moderate positions exist. Liberal approaches try to balance the global use of English with the preservation of minority languages. Scholars like Crystal have argued that English can serve as a shared language for global communication, while still allowing people to maintain their native tongues. Yet this vision, while idealistic, often ignores the reality that many languages decline when English becomes dominant. Economic, educational, and institutional systems favour English, pushing other languages to the margins. Language, in this model, becomes a marker of personal identity, rather than a political tool shaped by broader forces. Pennycook also explores more critical frameworks, such as Robert Phillipson’s idea of 'linguistic imperialism'. This approach sees English as a force that spreads through institutions like education, trade, and media, often displacing other languages. However, Pennycook notes that this perspective may underestimate how communities themselves adapt and resist English in creative ways. In contrast, language ecology frameworks emphasise linguistic diversity, viewing languages like species that must be protected. Yet even this approach can turn language into something static—something to preserve rather than use and transform. The most nuanced views, Pennycook argues, come from localised, situated analyses. Scholars like Canagarajah show how people in places like Sri Lanka or Iran use English in ways that reflect both global pressures and local identities. In these contexts, English is not just imposed from above but is actively negotiated and reshaped by speakers on the ground. These 'entanglements' between the global and the local reveal the complexity of language politics. It is time for a decolonial approach to language. Drawing on thinkers like Mignolo and Quijano, Pennycook shows how colonial power persists even after formal colonialism ends. This 'coloniality' shapes which languages are valued, how knowledge is produced, and who gets to speak in global forums. Decolonising language means challenging these hierarchies, supporting context-specific teaching methods, and embracing multilingual practices like translanguaging. It also means questioning the dominance of 'standard' languages

and native-speaker norms. Critical applied linguistics, Pennycook insists, must not be neutral. It must engage with the real politics of language—its histories, its inequalities, and its possibilities for transformation.

Global Englishes

In 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows[100]', Alastair Pennycook explores how English circulates across the world—not as a singular, fixed language, but as something constantly reshaped by local cultures. His approach challenges the idea of English as a global force simply spreading from the West to everywhere else. Instead, he focuses on how English is reworked, hybridised, and reimagined in local contexts through cultural forms like Hip Hop. A vivid example comes from a nightclub in Kuala Lumpur in 2003. The Malaysian rap duo Too Phat performed using a blend of English and African American Vernacular English, referencing global Hip Hop imagery like Long Beach, Louis Vuitton, and BMWs. But they also grounded their performance in local identity. Their lyrics were not about imitating American Hip Hop—they were about making something new. They rejected the usual materialism and included references to Muslim prayer and Malaysian street food. This performance highlights the tension Pennycook explores: is English in this context a form of cultural domination, or is it a tool for resistance and reinvention? Pennycook argues that Hip Hop is more than a borrowed style. It is a space where language and identity mix. As English moves globally, it does not stay the same. It blends with local languages and styles, creating what some call 'Blinglish'—a mix of Black English and glitzy Hip Hop slang. Some see this as shallow mimicry, but others view it as a powerful form of expression for marginalised voices. This dynamic plays out beyond music. In New Caledonia, Pennycook describes a performance of capoeira—an Afro-Brazilian martial art—in the capital city. The group uses English to teach and chant, even though the island has its own complex mix of languages and cultures. English here is not just a colonial leftover. It is part of a new cultural moment where global practices meet local traditions. The question then becomes: how does English function in these encounters? Is it a symbol of Western power, or is it being reshaped into something else entirely? Pennycook critiques older models of global English—like the 'three concentric circles' idea—which divide English speakers into native, second-language, and foreign-language groups. These models treat English as something stable. But English is constantly shifting. It is spoken, sung, and reinvented by people who were never part of the so-called 'centre'. Instead of being imposed, English is often taken up creatively—blended into local styles and used in new ways. This challenges the simple view of globalisation as Westernisation. What Pennycook calls 'transcultural flows' are more than just exports from the West. They are processes of back-and-forth exchange. Hip Hop, capoeira, and English all move globally, but they are reshaped by each place they land in. Global English becomes many Englishes—each with its own rhythm, politics, and history. In this way, Pennycook shifts the conversation. English is no longer just the language of commerce or empire. It becomes a resource for cultural innovation and identity-making. By focusing on real examples of language in use, 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows' opens a new way of seeing language—not as a fixed system, but as a living practice that crosses borders, mixes codes, and creates new worlds.

Taking the vernacular voices seriously

In 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows', Alastair Pennycook argues that hip-hop deserves more attention—not because it is fashionable, but because it reveals how language and

[100] Pennycook, A. (2007) Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows. Abingdon: Routledge.

culture move across borders. Often dismissed as violent, shallow, or commercial, hip-hop is usually kept at the edge of academic respectability. Critics from both conservative and Marxist traditions have written it off. Yet Pennycook insists that these vernacular voices matter. They speak to the heart of how people shape identity, resist authority, and navigate a global world. The problem lies in how popular culture is judged. In language education, high culture has long been preferred. Shakespeare belongs in the classroom. Tupac does not. Popular culture is treated as lesser, either because it is commercial or because it lacks moral or artistic depth. But this view misses something vital. Popular culture is where people live. It reflects their daily moods, frustrations, and desires. It is not just noise it is meaning in motion. Pennycook traces this bias to the roots of applied linguistics and its ties to literature, colonialism, and scientific objectivity. English education was historically designed to civilise, to uplift. As a result, educators have resisted what feels unruly or impure. But ignoring popular culture does not make it go away. On the contrary, it allows it to grow unexamined, reinforcing the idea that the only valid voices are those speaking in the polished tones of academic or literary language. Hip-hop forces us to confront this. It is undeniably global. It travels with English but adapts everywhere it goes. In Malaysia, it fuses with Muslim prayer and local slang. In France or Japan, it adopts new rhythms, dialects, and causes. Far from being passive consumers of American culture, young people around the world use hip-hop to say what they otherwise cannot. It gives voice to the unspoken and unsettles the dominant narratives. This does not mean hip-hop is free from critique. It can be violent or sexist. But dismissing it outright ignores the broader picture. Hip-hop is not just about selling records. It is about telling stories that matter—to those who have few other ways of being heard. In the U.S., it has long challenged racism and poverty. Globally, it speaks to disillusionment, marginalisation, and hope. Pennycook shows that English in hip-hop does not simply impose itself on other cultures. It bends and twists, absorbing new meanings. It becomes a tool—not of dominance, but of survival, even transformation. Through its rhymes and rhythms, it allows people to negotiate who they are. And it reminds us that language is not neutral. It is always part of a larger struggle over power, identity, and belonging. Taking the vernacular seriously means listening without prejudice. It means recognising that culture happens below the radar of elite institutions. In this space, voices emerge that are angry, joyful, raw, and real. They may not speak in the language of policy or poetry, but they speak—and that, Pennycook insists, is something we must hear.

6. RHETORIC

6.1. From Gorgias to Derrida

(Words of uncertainty: From sophism to deconstruction)

'The whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought'.

— George Orwell, 1984

'Speech is a powerful lord'.

— Gorgias, Encomium of Helen

'The opposition between philosophy and rhetoric is itself rhetorical'.

— Derrida, Dissemination

Lost cause of rhetoric

Rhetoric, as explored in 'The Lost Cause of Rhetoric: The Relation of Rhetoric and Geometry in Aristotle and Lacan[101]' by David Metzger, has often been misunderstood, either seen as too obvious to bother with or too obscure to matter. For some, it is an everyday tool we all use instinctively, while for others it is an abstract discipline no longer relevant. The double dismissal—both familiar and forgotten—pushes rhetoric out of serious intellectual discussion. This marginalisation comes not from a lack of value but from how philosophy has reshaped rhetoric in its own image. Rhetoric has been absorbed into philosophy. If language is perfectly precise, there is no need for rhetoric. If words can name things exactly, as Descartes believed, then rhetoric becomes mere ornamentation. It is not needed because clarity alone persuades. This renders rhetoric not just unnecessary but even deceptive. It is treated as a relic of imprecision, an echo of a time before logic and method. But if language can never fully express thought. Meaning always slips away. Derrida exemplifies this position, where rhetoric is not dismissed as false but absorbed as inevitable. It becomes something too common to notice—built into every act of speech. In this view, rhetoric is present everywhere but always insufficient, always failing to capture the truth. Both views, though opposite, lead to the same outcome: rhetoric is excluded as a genuine way of knowing. Philosophy has long framed knowledge through causality and stable relations. Descartes, for example, creates a system based on the infinity of the one—where truth applies uniformly, as in geometry. Derrida, conversely, proposes an infinity of the many—where meanings are constantly displaced. But both overlook a third possibility: the infinity of the, where meaning arises from specific contexts and unique relations. This is where rhetoric lives. Descartes' famous 'I think, therefore I am' appears logical, but it is more rhetorical than it seems. Thinking is used as proof of being, but causality is redefined through relation. Existence becomes a conclusion based on a relation, not a cause. The appeal to God as the guarantor of truth is not proof but a rhetorical strategy—a way to secure meaning by invoking a higher order. The claim is not just logical, but persuasive. Descartes also openly dismisses rhetoric. In his 'Discourse on Method', he says eloquence and poetry are natural talents, not skills worth studying. For him, arranging thoughts clearly is enough. Rhetoric, with its figures and flourishes, adds nothing. This belief reflects a broader trend: rhetoric is either seen as irrelevant because truth is self-evident or useless. After all, truth is unreachable. Rhetoric does not pretend to produce certainty. It engages with uncertainty. It does not resolve contradictions but helps people navigate them. Instead of offering rigid frameworks, it opens spaces where meaning can be negotiated. In this sense, rhetoric is not a failure of logic but a different way of reasoning—one that works with ambiguity, timing, and human experience. Rhetoric is operating at the edge of what can be known. Aristotle's enthymeme—a kind of rhetorical syllogism—relies on assumptions that are shared but unstated. It works by omission. It resembles Gödel's incompleteness theorem, which shows that no system can be complete within itself. Lacan's idea of the 'object a'—the missing piece that structures desire—echoes this. Rhetoric works in the space of what is missing, not what is

[101] Metzger, D. (1995) The Lost Cause of Rhetoric: The Relation of Rhetoric and Geometry in Aristotle and Lacan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

certain. The loss of rhetoric, then, is not just about neglect. It is about the limits of philosophical thought. When knowledge is treated as a system that must be either complete or hopeless, rhetoric disappears. But it is precisely in that space of uncertainty that rhetoric matters most. It offers a way to think about meaning, relation, and communication that does not depend on total clarity or permanent doubt. Rhetoric's exclusion is part of a long tradition of framing knowledge through opposites: presence and absence, clarity and obscurity, truth, and deception. But rhetoric does not fit neatly into those binaries. It works through time, change, and the particularity of context. It recognises that knowledge is shaped not just by what is said, but by how and when it is said. Rhetoric is not a mistake or a leftover from a pre-scientific era. It is a vital way of engaging with the world—one that challenges philosophy's assumptions and opens new ways of thinking about meaning and relation. If rhetoric thrives where certainty fails, can any act of communication ever be entirely free from persuasion?

Logos without rhetoric

In 'Logos without Rhetoric: The Arts of Language before Plato[102]', edited by Robin Reames, the origins of rhetoric are shown to be far older and more complex than the Platonic tradition suggests, rooted in pre-philosophical arts of language. Two main views shape the debate. One is the narratological account that sees rhetoric as a practical art that arose from political and legal needs, slowly evolving into theory. The other is the nominalist view, which claims rhetoric only began once it was named rhētorikē, likely by Plato in 'Gorgias'. From this angle, rhetoric is not simply a practice, but a theory that begins with classification. Only when distinguished from dialectic and sophistry did rhetoric become a field. The difference between these two views reflects deeper philosophical concerns. Both perspectives recognise that eloquence existed before theory but disagree on when rhetoric became something more than skilled speech. Writing, as both a tool and a medium, played a key role in this transformation. Early rhetoricians turned spontaneous eloquence into something teachable, stable, and textual. Writing allowed speech to be preserved and examined, turning lived persuasion into repeatable form. Without the word rhētorikē there was no unified theory—only scattered practices of persuasion. Naming the art creates its conceptual space. Yet this strict naming-based approach raises problems. Ancient terms like logos complicate matters. Logos can mean reason, speech, argument, or even divine order. Reading it as rhetorical in early texts risks projecting later meanings onto earlier authors. Also, since much early literature has been lost, rhetorical practices may have existed outside what survives. Limiting the history of rhetoric to surviving texts leaves gaps. There may have been theories that were never written or that disappeared in time. The essays in this volume explore rhetorical practice before Plato. They show that manipulation of language, audience awareness, and persuasive strategies predate the naming of rhetoric. The emergence of rhetoric was gradual. It evolved alongside changes in literacy, economics, and social norms. The formal naming of rhētorikē was important, but not absolute. Persuasion, eloquence, and audience adaptation existed earlier. The early sophists practiced a kind of rhetoric shaped by their time, not just by theory. With Athens' fall, their role changed. Rhetoric moved from private instruction to public debate, from oikonomia (household management) to civic life. The final section of this collection reflects on how rhetoric became a field of study. Robin Reames and others outline key questions: How do we define rhetoric without being anachronistic? What counts as rhetorical theory versus persuasive instinct? And how should we read early texts that may have used rhetorical methods without naming them as

[102] Reames, R. (ed.) (2017) Logos without Rhetoric: The Arts of Language before Plato. Columbia University Press.

such? These questions keep rhetorical history alive, not as a closed account but as an open inquiry. The development of rhetoric, as shown here, was not a single invention but an unfolding response to changing human needs. Speech became theory. Practice became discipline. But long before Plato gave rhetoric a name, people were already using language to move, shape, and persuade others.

Non-being and logos

In his dialogue 'Sophist', Plato presents a dense and intricate problem: how can falsehood exist if everything that is, simply is, and what is not, simply is not? Michael Wiitala explores this puzzle in his article 'The Communion of Non-Being and Logos in the Sophist Account of Falsehood[103]', focusing on a central but underexplored concept—koinōnia, or communion—between non-being and speech (logos). In section 260e3–261a2, the Eleatic Stranger tells Theaetetus that if they want to show falsehood is real, they must examine speech, opinion (doxa), and appearance (phantasia), and see how each relates to non-being. Although the dialogue analyses these elements, it does not explicitly show how speech communes with what is not. Wiitala attempts to clarify this missing step by proposing that the way logos combines elements—nouns and verbs—creates a structure that allows non-being to enter the picture. Speech does not merely mirror the structure of reality. It operates under its own rules. Beings, or ontos, relate to each other through fixed ontological relationships. Speech, on the other hand, is looser. It combines a subject and an action, often without grounding in any real connection between the two. Saying 'Theaetetus flies', for instance, brings together two real things—Theaetetus and flying—but forms a sentence that does not correspond to truth. This is only possible because speech allows combinations that reality does not. This is the basis of what Wiitala identifies as communion. Speech and non-being are not strictly opposed. Rather, speech provides a structure where non-being—what is not—can appear through misrelation. The elements in false speech exist, but their arrangement creates something untrue. Non-being is not a void but a kind of misplacement. The Stranger's point is not that speech lies by inventing fictional elements, but that it allows existing parts of the world to be assembled in ways that distort being. So, the phenomenon of falsehood, according to Wiitala's reading, arises not from speech referring to things that do not exist, but from its power to reshape existing elements into unreal relations. This reshaping is what makes logos dangerous, creative, and philosophically central. Speech does not merely describe the world; it reorganises it, and in that act, it opens the door to both truth and error. This flexible structure of speech, unlike the fixed order of beings, is what allows falsehood to occur. The communion between logos and non-being lies in that flexibility. The structure of a false statement can still follow the grammatical rules of language and contain meaningful parts, but the meaning it creates does not align with being. In this way, the 'Sophist' provides a subtle theory of how language becomes a vehicle for non-being, without collapsing into total nonsense.

Psychology of the logos

Charles P. Segal's essay 'Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos[104]' revisits one of antiquity's most enigmatic figures: Gorgias of Leontini. Living over a century and active during

[103] Wiitala, M. (2022). The Koinōnia of Non-Being and Logos in the Sophist Account of Falsehood. Areté, 36, pp.235–249. doi:https://doi.org/10.18800/arete.2022ext.013.

[104] Segal, C. P. (1962) Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos. Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 66, pp. 99–155.

a formative period in Greek thought, Gorgias stands at the intersection of philosophy, rhetoric, and early psychology. Though traditionally labelled a sophist, Segal emphasises that Gorgias' work goes beyond technical argumentation. His use of logos reveals a deep awareness of how speech affects the human psyche. Rather than constructing rigid theories of being, Gorgias explored the effect of language on perception and emotion. His best-known rhetorical works, Helen and Palamedes, are not merely exercises in style; they are psychological experiments. In Helen, Gorgias defends the infamous figure by dissecting the forces that might compel a person to act—among them, logos. He presents language as something akin to enchantment. Just as drugs affect the body, words affect the soul. This comparison is not metaphorical. Gorgias treats speech as a force with real power to change how people think and feel. Segal notes that Gorgias did not rely solely on logic. He aimed at the emotional core. His rhetoric moved audiences by triggering fear, pity, anger, or desire. The speaker, in his view, was not just a persuader but a kind of artist of the soul, shaping internal states with linguistic precision. This makes his work an early example of rhetorical psychology—long before psychology became a discipline. Gorgias understood that persuasion is not about facts alone. It is about how facts are framed, coloured, and delivered. It is about tone, rhythm, metaphor, and the unconscious. Gorgias also had a clear sense of the ethical stakes. While critics like Plato accused him of relativism or deception, Segal argues that Gorgias did not reject morality. Instead, he redefined it in aesthetic terms. The speaker's responsibility was not to state objective truths but to produce effects—to harmonise speech with situation, emotion, and audience. Like poetry or tragedy, rhetoric was a pharmakon: it could heal or poison, depending on its use. What Gorgias added to rhetorical theory was the idea that persuasion is not just a matter of convincing others through reasoning. It is a visceral act that reaches into the mind and stirs it. Through logos, the speaker does not simply explain; he transforms. Segal shows that this understanding makes Gorgias an intellectual ancestor not only to Aristotle but to modern thinkers concerned with ideology, propaganda, and media. Gorgias' speeches were more than clever arguments. They were performances. He knew that speech could awaken, disturb, soothe, or seduce. And in recognising that, he grasped something enduring: that language, at its most powerful, does not describe the world—it reshapes it from within.

Role of logos

In her article 'Public Reasoning and the Role of Logos in Gorgias and Aristotle[105]', Veronika Konrádová examines how two foundational thinkers understood the power of speech in shaping collective decision-making. Although Gorgias and Aristotle differ in their philosophical commitments, both recognise that logos—persuasive speech—is central to public life. Their views converge around the idea that humans must navigate a world of uncertainty, and that speech, not absolute knowledge, is what guides them. Gorgias treats speech as an active force. In his 'Encomium of Helen', logos is not a tool that reflects truth, but a master that creates realities. Speech can provoke, seduce, convince, and transform. For Gorgias, humans live in a world where doxa—opinion—takes precedence over certainty. In such a world, persuasion becomes essential. Since action cannot wait for perfect knowledge, the rhetor must guide others through a world of probabilities, not truths. This perspective gives rhetoric a practical function. Gorgias argues that logos structures experience by highlighting parts of a situation. The rhetor helps people see what matters in each moment. Speech becomes a lens through which action

[105] Konrádová, V. (2021) Public Reasoning and the Role of Logos in Gorgias and Aristotle, Fòns, \[online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.20318/fons.2021.5247

becomes possible. He also underlines its emotional power. Language stirs the soul—eliciting fear, joy, longing. These reactions are not accidental. They are necessary for decisions to feel justified. Rhetoric is the means through which opinion becomes action. While Aristotle often critiques the sophists, he shares Gorgias's view that humans live in a world of uncertainty. In the 'Nicomachean Ethics', Aristotle describes deliberation as a process that unfolds when outcomes are unclear. He claims that humans reason practically by weighing alternatives and considering timing and appropriateness. For him, speech plays a guiding role in this uncertain terrain. In 'Rhetoric', Aristotle extends this idea to political life. Deliberative rhetoric, he says, is how communities decide what to do. It is not neutral or objective. It is shaped by the character of the speaker and the mood of the audience. Aristotle accepts that persuasion includes more than logic. Emotions matter. Trust matters. The public speaker must earn attention and foster alignment, not just present arguments. Despite their different tones—Gorgias more performative, Aristotle more systematic—both thinkers understand that logos mediates between the speaker, the listener, and the world. Public life depends on shared speech, even when that speech does not produce certainty. In both views, rhetoric is not ornamental; it is the very condition of collective decision-making. Konrádová's reading shows that Gorgias and Aristotle, each in their own way, treat logos as a response to the fragility of human knowledge. It does not deliver truth, but it enables action. And in the political world, that is what matters most.

The problem of nonbeing

Michael D. Bakaoukas, in his article 'Nonexistence: A Comparative-Historical Analysis of the Problem of Nonbeing[106]', explores a question that has haunted philosophy since its beginning: how can something that does not exist still be spoken of, imagined, or reasoned about? The problem of nonbeing, stretching from ancient Greece to modern analytic philosophy, brings into focus the tension between thought and reality—between what is and what is not. Gorgias' treatise 'On What is Not' marks an early and radical moment in this history. Gorgias argued that nonbeing not only exists in discourse, but that it can be the object of thought. If one can think about a chimaera or a centaur, then these non-existent things, in some sense, 'are'—at least in the mind. This line of thinking, grounded in what Bakaoukas calls psychologism, suggests that nonbeing lives in imagination and memory. In Gorgias' view, mythical creatures, dreams, and lies all occupy a mental space that grants them a kind of presence, despite their absence in the real world. Plato disagreed. In the 'Sophist', he introduced a more nuanced view. Instead of treating nonbeing as an illusion or a figment of the mind, he described it as otherness—the idea that nonbeing is simply that which something else is not. This allowed for distinctions, change, and even falsehood to exist without requiring a contradiction. For Plato, nonbeing is essential for understanding diversity in the world. It is not absolute absence, but the background against which being appears. Later, Aristotle would continue this dialogue, making a careful distinction between being as actual existence and being as potential or logical form. He still held on to a realist framework but showed interest in how language and thought relate to what exists and what does not. In modern philosophy, the issue returned through the work of Brentano and Meinong. They revived Gorgias' line of reasoning, focusing on intentionality—the idea that the mind can direct itself toward things that may not exist. Meinong argued that non-existent objects, like the 'golden mountain' or 'round square', have a kind of being in thought. Russell pushed back. For him, this was a confusion of language.

[106] Bakaoukas, M. D. (2021) Nonexistence: A Comparative-Historical Analysis of the Problem of Nonbeing, University of Economics, Prague.

Using his theory of descriptions, Russell claimed that statements about nonbeing could be rephrased to avoid referring to fictional entities altogether. Saying 'the current king of France is bald' is meaningful, even if there is no such person. Quine later reframed the debate, suggesting that disputes about nonbeing are really disputes about ontology. Talking about Pegasus does not mean Pegasus exists. It just means the name 'Pegasus' has a use in language. The problem of nonbeing, then, is a tension between how humans think and how things are. Bakaoukas shows that from Gorgias to Quine, philosophers have wrestled with this paradox. Nonbeing is both impossible and unavoidable. It exists as a necessary shadow of thought—a space where meaning flickers, even when presence fails.

Meaning is in the act

In his article 'Gorgias the Sophist on Nonbeing: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation[107]', Michael Bakaoukas revisits the notorious claims of the sophist Gorgias through the lens of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Gorgias' treatise 'On What is Not' has been read in many ways—parody, nihilism, proto-scepticism—but Bakaoukas suggests that its real depth lies in how it challenges assumptions about language, meaning, and communication. Gorgias is famous for saying that nothing exists, that even if something did exist it could not be known, and even if it were known, it could not be communicated. These declarations sound extreme, even absurd. But they reflect a serious problem in philosophy: how do words relate to things? And how can people understand each other if they cannot directly access others' inner experiences? Traditionally, scholars have interpreted 'On What is Not' in three ways. The rhetorical approach sees it as a clever speech game—a display of persuasive skill rather than a philosophical argument. The ontological approach treats Gorgias as a kind of nihilist, rejecting the idea of stable being. A third approach argues that Gorgias was a serious thinker about language. Bakaoukas leans toward this third view but reframes it through Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, especially in his later work, argued that meaning is not something that lives inside words or minds, but something that happens in shared practices. Language is not a mirror of reality. It is a tool—part of a social activity. Gorgias, says Bakaoukas, grasped this centuries earlier. He saw that speech does not passively describe the world. It acts upon the world. It moves people. It provokes. Gorgias understood that speech could never fully communicate what one feels or thinks. He said that language is inexpressible and incommunicable in its deepest sense. This aligns with Wittgenstein's insight that private language—language grounded only in internal sensation—is impossible. Meaning arises not from inner images, but from how words are used in public contexts. Moreover, Gorgias believed that language creates emotional and psychological effects. A speech does not just inform; it transforms. This idea leads toward a behavioural theory of meaning. Words do things. They cause reactions. They do not have to refer to real objects to matter. This is why, for Gorgias, even fictional or false speech still has power. Perception, too, is unstable. Gorgias argued that the same object can appear differently to different people. What one sees or hears may not match another's experience. This raises doubt about whether language can ever bridge the gap between minds. It also mirrors Wittgenstein's idea that what counts as 'seeing' or 'meaning' depends on shared criteria, not on inner certainty. In this light, Gorgias appears less as a denier of truth and more as a thinker deeply attuned to the limits of language. He forces the reader to consider that speech is not neutral or transparent. It is partial, situated, and sometimes deceptive. But it is also our only

[107] Bakaoukas, M. (2001) Gorgias the Sophist on Nonbeing: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation, SORITES, Issue 13, pp. 80–89.

means of connection. Bakaoukas shows that Gorgias, like Wittgenstein, teaches that meaning is not in the head—it is in the act.

Powerlessness of logos

In 'Gorgias on Knowledge and the Powerlessness of Logos[108]', Josh Wilburn explores an important paradox: speech is powerful enough to shape belief, but powerless to affect knowledge. This tension lies at the heart of Gorgias' rhetorical theory, especially in his 'Encomium of Helen' and 'Defense of Palamedes', where persuasion is both a potent force and an impotent one, depending on what it seeks to change. Gorgias praises logos for its emotional and psychological force. In 'Helen', he compares speech to a drug. It can make people weep, shiver, or cheer, just through sound. Persuasive speech, he argues, can override a person's will, compelling action. Yet even as he builds this case for rhetorical power, Gorgias subtly warns us not to overestimate it. Logos may move hearts, but it cannot touch what people know through direct experience. This limitation is most clear when Gorgias distinguishes between belief (doxa) and knowledge (epistēmē). Beliefs shift. They are unstable, like clay. They can be moulded by eloquence, fear, or desire. But knowledge is firm. It is rooted in sensory experience—what one sees, hears, or remembers firsthand. Logos can suggest, insinuate, or mislead, but it cannot erase memory or produce certainty where none existed. In 'Palamedes', the speaker asks the jury whether they believe he is guilty or know it. If they only believe, then their judgment is open to persuasion. But if they know, persuasion becomes irrelevant. Gorgias, through Palamedes, stresses that rhetoric functions only in the absence of firsthand knowledge. If a juror had witnessed the crime, no speech would be needed. This argument shows the epistemic boundary that logos cannot cross. Wilburn links this to a broader epistemological view Gorgias seems to hold something close to folk empiricism. People trust what they have experienced with their senses. They believe speakers only when they lack direct evidence. In this sense, rhetoric fills a void. Logos becomes a tool for navigating uncertainty, not for altering what is already certain. The power of logos lies in its reach over belief. That is why persuasion thrives in courts and assemblies—places where listeners must act without knowing the full truth. But its power ends where perception begins. One cannot be persuaded that fire does not burn after touching it. Logos cannot make a person 'unknow' what they have seen. Gorgias's speeches suggest he was acutely aware of this. Logos is impressive not because it can create knowledge, but because it thrives where knowledge fails. It is the master of shadows, not of light. It builds narratives where facts are absent. But it cannot replace the authority of direct experience. Wilburn's reading shows that Gorgias does not celebrate logos uncritically. He honours its power while recognising its limits. In doing so, Gorgias gives us a rhetoric that is both realistic and restrained—a tool for persuasion, not for revelation.

Rhetoric of symbolic exchange

In 'Jean Baudrillard: The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange[109]' (2010), Barbara Gogan presents Baudrillard as a thinker who deliberately resists fixed classifications—eschewing titles like philosopher or sociologist—in favour of a rhetorical mode that subverts categories through irony, paradox, and symbolic play. His writing operates across boundaries, always disrupting the rules that define disciplines. He did not simply work across fields—he undermined them.

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[108] Wilburn, J. (2020) Gorgias on Knowledge and the Powerlessness of Logos, Wayne State University, Department of Philosophy.

[109] Gogan, B. (2010) 'The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange', in Jean Baudrillard: The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

For Baudrillard, academic disciplines were less about knowledge than about control. They confined ideas, making them manageable and predictable. He called them a kind of house arrest for concepts. Even interdisciplinary studies, in his view, often serve to reinforce these boundaries rather than subvert them. Baudrillard's refusal to define himself was a rhetorical act. When asked what he did, he turned the question back on the asker. He did not lack a position—he made ambiguity his position. This act of resisting definition mirrors his deeper philosophical aim: to show how language, identity, and meaning are shaped by illusions. His rhetorical stance was less about persuasion than about disruption. He played with meaning, created uncertainty, and exposed the structures that hold perception in place. At the heart of Baudrillard's thinking is a theory of symbolic exchange. This involves a dual movement: the art of appearance and the art of disappearance. The art of appearance is about the creation of signs and meanings. It is how language and images shape the world. But for Baudrillard, these appearances are never innocent. In the modern media landscape, signs no longer point to anything real. They only point to other signs. This is what he called simulation. Meaning detaches from reality, and what remains is a loop of references that produce a sense of the real, but not reality itself. The art of disappearance counters this. It is a strategy of resistance. Instead of producing more signs, it withdraws, erases, and dismantles meaning. Baudrillard often used irony, silence, and contradiction to undermine the illusions he described. His writing style—aphoristic, fragmented, and provocative—was part of this strategy. He did not want to explain the world. He wanted to unsettle the way people see it. Baudrillard's approach to rhetoric goes beyond language. It includes his public persona, his performances, and his refusal to be fixed in place. He rejected the label of postmodernist, even though he was often called one. He worked with ideas from Saussure, Marx, and Nietzsche, but used them in ways that broke from their original contexts. His rhetorical technique involved seduction rather than argument. He used paradoxes and reversals not to solve problems but to show that the problems themselves might be illusions. To understand Baudrillard rhetorically is to see that his writing was a kind of performance. He acted out the very instability he described. His theory of symbolic exchange shows how meaning is not just made but undone. He was not trying to replace false ideas with true ones. He wanted to expose the system that made truth and falsity interchangeable. His rhetoric does not offer answers—it forces a confrontation with the instability of language, reality, and knowledge. Baudrillard's rhetoric reminds us that in a world saturated by images, appearances often matter more than facts. His theory challenges readers to see how deeply language shapes perception and how easily that perception can be manipulated or erased. In a time of endless information and simulation, his work remains a powerful tool for understanding how meaning is made—and unmade. Baudrillard's art of disappearance as a rhetorical strategy aimed at resisting the saturation of meaning in a hypermediated world; rather than exposing or clarifying, disappearance becomes a form of symbolic refusal, a way to counteract the domination of signs by withdrawing from visibility and transparency, thereby restoring a sense of enigmatic presence and preserving the radical ambiguity of symbolic exchange. Disappearance is not passive. It is not about fading quietly. It is active, disruptive, and even creative. The rhetoric of disappearance does not produce counterarguments or alternative truths. It shows how truth itself can be a performance. It does not try to correct illusions but lets them play out until they consume themselves. Disappearance uses irony, withdrawal, and silence to unmake the dominance of visibility and explanation. But its power lies in how it rethinks communication. Where most theories of rhetoric aim to make things clearer, Baudrillard suggests that clarity can be the problem. In a world overwhelmed by visibility, perhaps the most radical gesture is to vanish.

Between logos and lure

In 'Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry[110]', Keith Crome explores the intersections between Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern philosophy and ancient Greek sophistry. Lyotard reclaims the sophist as a subversive figure who resists the totalising logic of philosophical discourse. Lyotard revisited Gorgias, questioned the opposition between being and non-being, and explored rhetorical strategies that challenge philosophical assumptions. In 'The Differend', Lyotard introduces a concept that becomes key to understanding his engagement with sophistry: 'the differend'. It refers to a type of conflict that cannot be resolved by appealing to a common framework. When two language games collide but do not share a rulebook, there is no neutral ground for judgment. This is not simply a linguistic problem. It cuts into ethics, politics, and ontology. Lyotard draws from the sophists. From Gorgias, he borrows the idea that language itself does not guarantee truth. From Protagoras, the belief that meaning is shaped by context and power. There is a tension between philosophical systems that seek universal agreement and the sophistic insistence on the irreducibility of difference. In this view, truth is not a stable entity to be discovered but something performed in speech, shaped by persuasion, context, and force. Philosophy, from Plato onward, has tried to suppress this realisation by casting sophistry as trickery or deception. But for Lyotard, sophistry does not undermine reason—it reveals its limits. It shows that discourse is always entangled with desire, rhetoric, and power. In 'Just Gaming', Lyotard uses sophistry to rethink judgment. 'The differend' is not just a disagreement. It is the moment when one party in a conflict cannot even phrase their wrong in the terms available. In this situation, justice cannot be achieved through consensus. It requires an awareness of the limits of discourse itself. Sophistry becomes a way of thinking that does not try to erase difference but sustains it. It recognises the impossibility of complete understanding and the violence that arises when one language game dominates another. Lyotard's use of sophistry is deeply political. He exposes how philosophy, in its quest for truth and clarity, often excludes other voices. The sophist, in contrast, speaks from the margins, disrupting the smooth flow of reason with paradox, irony, and ambiguity. Gorgias's assertion that nothing exists, and even if it did, it could not be communicated, was not nihilism. It was a challenge to the very structure of knowledge and language. Lyotard sees in this challenge a model for thinking without closure, for resisting totalising discourses. 'The differend' reveals that injustice often occurs not through lies but through silence—when one party cannot even make their suffering intelligible. Restoring sophistry means recognising this silence and resisting the temptation to resolve it too quickly. It means honouring the dignity of speech that does not fit, of voices that do not align with dominant narratives. The task is not to reconcile all differences but to keep them open—to listen without forcing agreement. Philosophy cannot escape the problem of rhetoric, that reason cannot exist without persuasion, and that truth cannot be separated from language. Sophistry is not a failure of philosophy—it is its shadow, its remainder, its necessary other. Philosophy of what it tries to forget: that every act of speaking is also an act of positioning, of exclusion, and desire. Greek sophistry challenges modern thought to confront its own foundations, to admit the fragility of its categories, and to think with rather than against difference. In doing so, Lyotard reopens a question as old as philosophy itself: who speaks, in whose name, and with what authority?

6.2. Rhetoric of power

(The discursive state: The rhetorical structure of authority)

[110] Crome, K. (2004) Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

'Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall. It aims to perfect the imperfect; to correct the imbalance of powers through identification'.

- Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives

The Birth of Rhetoric

In Robert Wardy's 'The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and their Successors[111]', the figure of Gorgias stands at the uneasy threshold between philosophy and performance, between logos as truth and logos as spectacle. He is remembered not for developing a systematic school of thought, but for pushing language to its extremes—ornamented, paradoxical, and unsettling. Gorgias' contribution to rhetoric lies not just in his stylistic flair but in his radical questioning of meaning itself. He was both admired and ridiculed, and that tension still defines how rhetoric is viewed: as both powerful and untrustworthy. Gorgias' fame began with his dazzling display in Athens, where he offered to speak on any topic at a moment's notice. His exclamation, 'Give me a theme!' was not arrogance, but a challenge to traditional knowledge. What mattered was not what he said, but that he could say anything with style and force. His rhetoric was improvisational, ornamental, and persuasive, but it also posed philosophical questions. Can speech create reality? Does language shape belief more than truth does? His most infamous work, 'On What Is Not', seems absurd on its surface. Gorgias claims that nothing exists, and if something does, it cannot be known, and if it is known, it cannot be communicated. But this is not just playful nihilism. It is a deep challenge to the idea that logos can transmit truth. For Gorgias, language is never the thing itself—it is only a gesture, a shadow, a manipulation. Words do not represent reality; they evoke it. And in doing so, they can mislead, persuade, and seduce. This was more than intellectual provocation. Gorgias offered a theory of rhetoric that embraced its artifice. Unlike Plato, who sought stable, eternal truths, Gorgias emphasised the performative moment. The spoken word is not judged by its fidelity to some objective reality but by its effect—how it moves the soul. His 'Encomium of Helen' defends Helen not through evidence but through rhetorical strategy. She may have been persuaded, deceived, or even possessed—but in each case, she is blameless. Logos, he argues, has the power of force. It acts upon the listener like a drug, altering perception and emotion. This analogy—logos as pharmakon—anticipates later thinkers who saw language as both remedy and poison. Plato's 'Gorgias' responds sharply to this vision. In it, Socrates attacks rhetoric as a counterfeit art, a kind of flattery devoid of true knowledge. He draws a firm line between persuasion and teaching, between appearance and reality. But the dialogue form Plato uses complicates this distinction. The arguments unfold through conversation, through dramatic tension, rather than straightforward exposition. Plato, in trying to dismiss Gorgias, ends up adopting some of his methods. He stages philosophy as a performance, engaging the audience not with didactic certainty but with provocation and irony. The debate between Gorgias and Plato is not easily resolved. Each critiques the other's foundation: Gorgias mocks the stability of truth, Plato distrusts the surface play of words. But they both recognise the stakes. Rhetoric is not just verbal decoration. It is about power—who gets to speak, who is believed, who shapes reality through discourse. Gorgias refuses to hide the artifice. Plato tries to ground language in a higher rationality. Yet both end up revealing that language is always caught between presence and absence, between saying and meaning. Rhetoric emerges not as a stable tradition but as a question that keeps returning. Can humans ever speak truly? Or are all speech acts forms of

[111] Wardy, R. (2000) The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and their Successors. Routledge.

persuasion, endlessly shaped by context, style, and intention? Gorgias' legacy may not lie in his arguments, but in his audacity—in showing that logos, the very thing on which philosophy builds itself, might be nothing more than a beautiful illusion.

Sophistry and politics

In 'Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates[112]', Robert C. Bartlett revisits the ancient confrontation between Sophistry and Socratic inquiry, arguing that Protagoras's rhetorical approach fundamentally reshapes our understanding of political reasoning. Persuasion is as an essential component of political life and sophistic techniques remain relevant to contemporary democratic discourse and institutional critique. Political philosophy today faces a double dilemma. On one side, scholars focus on historical accuracy, carefully tracing the thought of ancient thinkers. On the other, self-declared sophists and postmodern thinkers reject metaphysical certainty altogether, offering narratives that serve political or moral agendas without claiming universal truth. These two camps—historical purists and modern sophists—seem opposed, yet both ultimately avoid the deeper question: is truth still possible? Bartlett argues that this evasion mirrors the ancient debate between Socrates and the sophists. Sophistry, far from being a modern invention, accompanied the birth of philosophy itself. Socrates did not ignore it—he confronted it directly. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often debates the sophists, most notably Protagoras. These encounters are not accidental. Since Plato rarely shows Socrates in conversation with other philosophers, the sophists represent the clearest rivals to his intellectual mission. Their debates expose two conflicting visions of human life—one rooted in persuasion and convention, the other in reasoned inquiry and virtue. Protagoras, the most sophisticated of the sophists, presents a serious challenge to Socrates. He openly calls himself a sophist and takes pride in teaching for a fee. Unlike others, who hide behind poetry or athletics, Protagoras makes persuasion his one true art. He believes political life is a human invention—necessary, but not natural. People are not born social; they become political through training and habit. Justice and piety, for him, are tools to maintain order, not eternal truths. His teachings do not aim to reform society but to help individuals succeed within it. Socrates, by contrast, refuses to separate politics from virtue. His philosophy seeks to uncover what justice is, not just how it functions. Where Protagoras uses myth to persuade the many, Socrates demands open dialectic—questioning, dialogue, and the pursuit of truth. Their debate is not just about politics; it is about the human soul. Socrates sees philosophy as a way of life, while Protagoras sees it as a career. Protagoras' rhetoric works on multiple levels. It speaks differently to the masses, to the powerful, and to the wise. His myths appeal to popular sentiment. His speeches to elites offer advice on power and governance. But in dialogue with Socrates, he falters. He resists dialectic, avoids clear answers, and treats justice as a matter of custom. This evasion reveals the gap between rhetoric and philosophy. Socrates exposes Protagoras' unwillingness to confront the questions that matter most. The debate between Socrates and Protagoras reflects a deeper question: is politics about truth or power? Socrates argues that truth and virtue are inseparable from a just life. Protagoras sees success in political life as its own reward. Their disagreement still echoes today—in every political debate shaped by persuasion rather than principle.

[112] Bartlett, R.C. (2016) Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates. University of Chicago Press.

Taming democracy

In 'Taming Democracy[113]', Jon Elster offers a rigorous examination of the paradoxes within democratic systems—how well-meaning institutions often produce unintended and even deleterious outcomes. Blending political theory with social science, Elster advocates for 'incentive-based design', proposing institutional reforms that temper populist excesses while preserving democratic legitimacy. In ancient Athens, democracy was loud, direct, and unruly. Citizens—sometimes over six thousand at once—gathered in the Assembly to debate and decide matters of war, peace, and justice. Every voice could be heard, at least in theory. But how could such a chaotic forum lead to wise decisions? That question haunted many Athenian thinkers, and Jon Elster's 'Taming Democracy' explores their attempts to answer it. Athenian democracy was radical in its inclusivity. Decisions were made not by a select elite, but by ordinary male citizens who voted after open deliberation. Yet this form of government posed an enormous challenge: how could the masses, driven by emotion and easily swayed by rhetoric, be guided toward sound judgment? Elster focuses on how political rhetoric—words spoken in public with the intent to persuade—could either improve or destroy the democratic process. He begins by examining how democracy's critics saw this dilemma. Early plays, political treatises, and historical dialogues warned that the demos, or people, lacked the discipline and foresight to govern. Herodotus imagined Persians debating democracy, monarchy, and oligarchy, only for democracy to be rejected as rule by ignorance. Euripides showed Theban envoys mocking Athenian openness to debate. Aristophanes, through satire, portrayed the demos as gullible and easily manipulated by flattering demagogues. Even the so-called Old Oligarch admitted democracy's success came not from virtue but from necessity—the poor ruled because Athens relied on them for war and labour. Despite these critiques, political rhetoric did not vanish. It evolved. Thucydides, in his 'History of the Peloponnesian War', recorded great speeches delivered in the Assembly, especially those of Pericles. Thucydides admired Pericles' ability to use speech not to flatter, but to lead. For him, Athens under Pericles was still democratic in name but ruled by reason through persuasion. Yet even Thucydides warned that after Pericles' death, rhetoric degenerated into populist manipulation. Plato went further. In his dialogues, he dismissed rhetoric as flattery—an art of pleasing rather than teaching. He proposed that only philosopher-kings, trained in truth, should govern. But even Plato conceded that if rhetoric could be purified and made subject to reason, it might still serve the polis. Demosthenes, a later statesman, represented another model. He believed in democracy but feared its decline. His speeches aimed to awaken the people, not with empty slogans, but with hard truths. For Demosthenes, rhetoric was not the problem; corrupted rhetoric was. The challenge was to restore it—to tame it—so it could once again serve the common good. Elster's central insight is that all these thinkers—despite their different views—understood the same basic truth: rhetoric is powerful, and democracy depends on how it is used. Taming democracy means taming language. It means finding ways to discipline public speech, to guide collective judgment, and to protect reason from passion. Ancient Athens offers no easy answers, but it shows the stakes: when speech fails, so does freedom.

Sinecure Language

The term sinecure—from Latin sine (without) and cura (care)—originally described ecclesiastical positions that required no pastoral responsibility for the care of souls. Over time, it evolved to describe any role that comes with title, salary, or prestige but demands little or no

[113] Elster, J. (1995) Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens. Cambridge University Press.

actual labour. Yet while sinecure positions appear outdated or ceremonial, they persist in modern political and institutional systems—not only as placeholders or honorary posts but as mechanisms to distribute patronage and protect the status quo. What often goes unnoticed is the distinctive 'language without care' that accompanies these roles: a rhetorical performance designed to conceal inaction behind bureaucratic fluency. The core function of a sinecure today is not labour but representation: it serves as a symbol of continuity, participation, or expertise, while contributing little to the work it ostensibly supports. Holders of sinecure positions, whether ministers without portfolio, titular heads, or dignitaries in bloated bureaucracies, develop a vocabulary that signals purpose without delivering substance. This is sinecure language—language designed not to clarify or persuade, but to appear active while being structurally passive. It includes phrases like 'ongoing dialogue', 'stakeholder engagement', 'strategic alignment', and 'capacity building', all of which give the illusion of progress while ensuring nothing measurable or disruptive takes place. This rhetoric serves a specific purpose: to stabilise institutions by neutralising dissent and avoiding decision-making. The sinecure speaker does not argue, challenge, or innovate; instead, they reiterate broad principles, uphold process, and echo consensus. Their language is marked by vague optimism, procedural hedging, and professionalised detachment. It is a discourse without consequence, an art of presence without impact. By framing inaction as deliberation, and delay as consultation, sinecure language becomes a shield for inertia, allowing individuals to retain influence while evading responsibility. Historically, sinecures were abundant in the British civil service and royal household, where positions that once required real work became ceremonial placeholders. Over time, many of these were abolished by reform statutes, but the principle remained intact. The modern minister without portfolio, for example, has no specific department but may hold a cabinet position for reasons of political balancing or symbolic inclusion. The Canadian Government House Leader is often attached to a sinecure ministry simply to meet formal requirements of cabinet membership. These arrangements reflect not only a pragmatic use of power but also a linguistic habit: to name roles not for their function but for their strategic utility. This disconnection between title and task, speech and action, produces a culture of institutional maintenance over societal contribution. The sinecure-holder is not tasked with solving problems but with appearing relevant, sustaining the machinery of prestige, and speaking fluently in a language of low-risk diplomacy. Their discourse often includes references to heritage, continuity, or cross-sector collaboration—phrases that sound inclusive but commit to nothing. In this sense, sinecure language is not just empty—it is purposefully evasive, designed to protect the speaker from scrutiny and the institution from change. In an era that prizes visibility over utility, the sinecure endures not because it serves the public, but because it serves the system. And its language, polished but hollow, ensures that those who say nothing still sound like they are saying something.

Strategic polarisation

In 'Party Elites or Manufactured Doubt? The Informational Context of Climate Change Polarisation[114]', Eric Merkley and Dominik A. Stecula examine why American public opinion on climate change has become sharply divided—even as scientific consensus has grown stronger. They argue that partisan polarisation stems less from public access to misinformation and more from elite-driven messaging, particularly cues from political leaders. Through comprehensive analysis of media coverage, they find that contrary to the popular 'manufactured

[114] Merkley, E. & Stecula, D. A. (2021) Party Elites or Manufactured Doubt? The Informational Context of Climate Change Polarization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

doubt' narrative, it is elite partisan signalling—especially backlash against out-party cues—that most consistently shapes scepticism. For example, public disagreement about climate change is often blamed on deep political divisions. In the United States, this divide is particularly stark. Many assume that ordinary people simply follow the cues of their political leaders. Others argue that misinformation campaigns have manipulated the public. This study asks a simple but important question: Is climate change polarisation the result of elite messaging, or has it been manufactured through deliberate doubt? The researchers focus on two major sources of influence. First, they look at party elites—politicians, media figures, and opinion leaders. These actors shape what their supporters think, especially in polarised environments. When Republican leaders express scepticism about climate change, many Republican voters adopt similar views. The second source of influence comes from industry-backed efforts to create confusion. Certain corporations and think tanks, often linked to fossil fuel interests, have long worked to cast doubt on climate science. These campaigns do not just spread falsehoods. They generate uncertainty, making people question the reliability of scientific findings altogether. The study finds that elite cues are powerful but not the whole story. Republican elites, especially since the early 2000s, have increasingly denied or downplayed climate change. Their messaging has been echoed in conservative media. This, in turn, has influenced public attitudes, creating a feedback loop. But elite influence alone does not explain the intensity of climate scepticism. That is where manufactured doubt comes in. Industry actors have invested heavily in shaping public discourse. Their strategy is not always to argue against climate change directly. Instead, they raise questions about the credibility of science. They highlight disagreement among scientists—even when that disagreement is exaggerated or irrelevant. This tactic works because it plays into the way people process information. When individuals hear that experts are uncertain or divided, they become less confident in the issue, even if the scientific consensus is strong. The result is a kind of polarisation that goes beyond politics. People are not just divided along party lines; they inhabit different informational worlds. One group sees climate change as an urgent problem. The other views it as exaggerated, politicised, or even fake. This gap is not just the product of elite messaging. It is also the outcome of a deliberate campaign to muddy the waters. If people are to make informed decisions, they need access to reliable information—and protection from those who profit by distorting it. In the end, the study shows that polarisation over climate change is not inevitable. It has been shaped—sometimes by leaders, sometimes by strategic manipulation.

Rhetorics of a communist

In 'The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People [115]' Xing Lu shows how the rhetorical construction of a new communist subject was fundamental to Mao's revolutionary vision and the ideological transformation it aimed to achieve. Xing Lu traces how Mao combined Marxist ideology with Chinese tradition to shape not just policies or institutions, but people themselves. Mao was not merely interested in economic reform or military victory—he wanted to transform minds and hearts. This vision drew on earlier models. Thinkers like Lenin had proposed the 'new Soviet man', a figure moulded by revolutionary values. Mao took this idea and localised it. The 'new Communist person' would be someone selfless, hardworking, and unwaveringly loyal to the Party. For Mao, transformation meant more than material progress—it required moral and ideological purification. Mao's influences included both Marx and Confucius. From Marxism, he took the idea that social conditions and class

[115] Lu, X. (2004) The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People, University of South Carolina Press.

struggle shape consciousness. From Confucianism, he borrowed the belief that virtue could be cultivated. Mao's rhetorical brilliance lay in his ability to fuse these seemingly opposing traditions. He promised a modern, socialist future, but he grounded it in ideas that felt culturally familiar. Traditional Chinese thought emphasised the renren, the moral person devoted to harmony and service. Mao's version of this figure was recast in revolutionary terms. Instead of harmony, struggle; instead of family loyalty, devotion to the Party. Yet the tools of transformation—education, imitation of virtuous models, and self-discipline—remained similar. Mao believed the masses could be reshaped through what he called 'thought reform'. He launched campaigns to change how people thought, spoke, and behaved. These campaigns used the rhetoric of moral renewal but were backed by pressure and surveillance. People were urged to engage in 'criticism and self-criticism', a ritual in which they confessed ideological errors and pledged to improve. This process, Mao believed, would gradually produce new, purified individuals. In speeches and writings, Mao described this transformation as both necessary and heroic. To serve the people meant giving up selfish interests. Simplicity, sacrifice, and obedience were not just values—they were revolutionary duties. The Communist person was to be tireless, modest, and emotionally disciplined. Personal ambition was suspect; ideological loyalty was everything. Rhetorically, Mao used vivid language and moral binaries. You were either with the people or against them. You either embraced reform or resisted progress. This simplification made his message powerful, especially among the less educated. Through slogans, posters, and songs, the image of the ideal Communist took hold. The Party was portrayed not as a bureaucracy but as a moral community, and Mao its spiritual leader. greatest influence lay in his rhetorical power. His words reached across China and shaped a new kind of citizen. He used speech to define what it meant to be Chinese under socialism. Mao's public addresses and writings were filled with conviction, metaphor, and repetition. They called people to action and gave them a shared purpose. Mao's rhetorical style evolved over time. Influenced by Confucian scholars like Han Yu and modern reformers like Liang Qichao, Mao blended classical Chinese literary traditions with the simplicity of vernacular language. This allowed him to speak both to intellectuals and peasants. His language was direct but poetic, filled with metaphors drawn from nature, war, and Chinese history. One of Mao's most famous phrases, 'A single spark can start a prairie fire', was used to rally followers during times of defeat. His metaphors gave shape to revolutionary hope and turned abstract ideology into concrete images. His speeches did not just explain ideas—they created belief. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's words became tools of control. People quoted him to prove loyalty, and disagreement was dangerous. Lu shows that Mao's rhetoric was more than persuasive—it was transformative. He redefined words like 'people', 'democracy', and 'revolution' to fit the goals of the Party. These redefinitions were not just linguistic—they changed how people understood themselves and their place in society. By focusing on Mao's use of language, Lu reveals how power is not only built through institutions or violence but also through words. Mao's rhetoric helped unify a fractured nation, but it also helped redefined it. His words built a new China—and left deep tracks that remain today.

Ontology of persuasion

Persuasion is no longer what it used to be. Once tied to political oratory or courtroom debate, it now spills over into places we do not expect—into dragonflies, hummingbirds, or even the element cobalt. In 'The New Ontology of Persuasion[116]' Marilyn M. Cooper offers a new understanding of persuasion as something ecological, grounded in encounters that change

[116] Cooper, M.M. (2011) 'The New Ontology of Persuasion', JAC, 31(3-4), pp. 421–450.

us. It is less about control and more about listening, less about mastery and more about transformation. This approach reframes persuasion as a mutual relation among all beings—human and nonhuman alike. Drawing from Timothy Morton's notion of the 'ecological thought', Cooper invites readers to consider what it means to listen to 'strange strangers'—beings radically different from us. These encounters are not metaphorical. A dragonfly landing on one's leg is not just a curious moment; it is a provocation. The world calls out in many voices. Persuasion, then, must be seen as rooted in openness. It requires attentiveness to things that do not speak our language but still speak in their way. To be persuaded is not to be conquered by a better argument. It is to be moved—sometimes without knowing why. This idea draws on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, who suggest that genuine thought does not seek to dismantle opposing views but to remain open to new propositions. Persuasion becomes not a matter of winning but of welcoming. As Cooper puts it, this is a 'polite modification of dreams'—a gentle reshaping of the self, done not through force but through encounter. This openness, however, demands new habits of listening. First, one must believe there is something to hear. This belief, simple as it sounds, reshapes the world. If even a dragonfly carries knowledge, then everything becomes a potential interlocutor. Second, the listener must honour the individuality of the other. Each moment is unique, like the dragonfly's flight—a gathering of time, space, and matter. It is not merely a symbol; it is an event. Finally, listening requires new methods. Just as science invents instruments to let nonhumans speak—Geiger counters, spectrometers—we, too, need new tools of perception to tune in to the world. Cooper's account turns persuasion into a democratic practice, but not in the usual sense. It is democratic because it assumes that everything has something to say. It rejects the hierarchy of speaker over listener. In this view, persuasion is a shared process, not a technique. The one who listens is not passive. Being persuaded is a form of participation—a response, an adjustment, a shift in direction. This shift is not an accident; it is the core of what persuasion is. This new ontology of persuasion does not seek agreement as its final aim. Instead, it seeks resonance. Like a hummingbird's wings or a cobalt current under ice, persuasion becomes the quiet pulse of relationship, the unseen motion that links us to the world.

Rhetoric in the cyber age

Jeff Pruchnic's book, 'Rhetoric and Ethics in the Cybernetic Age[117]', explores how technological systems shape how people think, act, and communicate. Rather than seeing machines and digital media as distancing or dehumanising, Pruchnic argues they are becoming more human. Today's systems copy life. They learn, adapt, and respond. As a result, human behaviour is no longer outside these systems. It is produced within them. Traditional thought separates logos and techne. Logos is reason, speech, or logic. Techne is skill, craft, or tool use. This split shaped ethical and political ideas for centuries. But in today's world, this division breaks down. Rhetoric—once a human practice of persuasion—is now tied to technical systems. These systems operate through feedback, personalisation, and prediction. They are everywhere: in schools, healthcare, politics, and even daily speech. Cybernetics helps explain this shift. The term, revived by Norbert Wiener, comes from the Greek word for steersman. It means the study of control and communication in machines and living things. In the mid-20th century, thinkers across biology, philosophy, and mathematics met to discuss how systems self-regulate. They focused on feedback and dynamic interaction. These ideas spread beyond science into culture. Now, the logic of cybernetics drives how people interact with information and with each other.

[117] Pruchnic, J. (2013) Rhetoric and Ethics in the Cybernetic Age: The Transhuman Condition. University of Pittsburgh Press.

This shift changes ethics. Pruchnic calls it the transhuman condition. It is not about uploading the mind or merging with machines. Instead, it describes how people live inside systems that shape who they are. People are constantly watched, measured, and adjusted. Algorithms suggest choices before they are made. This affects how people act, think, and relate to others. Rhetoric becomes key. It is how people navigate and respond to these systems. But persuasion now happens through coded channels. Messages are tailored. They follow emotional triggers. Political ads, health apps, and learning platforms all use rhetoric built on feedback and control. Ethics cannot be fixed or absolute in this context. It becomes adaptive, interactive, and systemic. Pruchnic gives examples from everyday life. Take the red shoes from the (Product) RED campaign. They are stylish and linked to charity. Buying them feels ethical. But this is ethics turned into consumer performance. People shop to show they care. Ethics becomes something seen, tracked, and sold. This is not just empty virtue. It reflects how ethics works now—in a world where values are expressed through media and design. So, how should people respond? Not with nostalgia or rejection. Instead, by recognising that ethics and rhetoric today are shaped by systems. The challenge is to act within those systems without becoming passive. Pruchnic suggests that ethics must be rethought as something dynamic. It is not about rules or purity. It is about relationships, feedback, and adaptation in an age of control and communication. Pruchnic's work is a call to engage, not retreat. He shows how rhetoric remains a vital tool for understanding power, behaviour, and meaning in the cybernetic age. It is not just what people say—it is how they say it, how it moves, and how systems respond. In this landscape, ethics begins again.

Rhetoric of power

In 'European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power[118]', Immanuel Wallerstein examines how the language of universal values has long served as a cover for domination. Across centuries, Western powers have used moral claims—human rights, democracy, civilisation—as justification for conquest and control. Behind the rhetoric lies a strategic pattern. What appears to be benevolent intervention is often a way to sustain global inequality while appearing virtuous. Wallerstein begins with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Sepúlveda defended Spain's brutal expansion, calling indigenous peoples barbarians who needed guidance. Las Casas countered, insisting the violence had no moral basis. That 16th-century debate set the tone for modern claims of moral superiority. Whether through colonialism, war, or economic restructuring, Western powers have consistently claimed to help while taking control. Over time, the justifications evolved. As colonialism became harder to defend, a softer ideology emerged: Orientalism. Colonised societies were no longer called savage. Instead, they were described as noble but backward—civilisations in need of Western leadership. This portrayal still served the same goal. It justified the presence and rule of the West. Later, as even Orientalism lost credibility, another form took its place—scientific universalism. Scientific universalism presented inequality as objective fact. Neoliberal economic policies—free markets, deregulation, austerity—were sold not as choices, but as natural laws. This was not just a shift in policy, but a powerful rhetorical move. By claiming neutrality, these policies avoided political debate. The implication was clear: those who failed under these systems did so because of internal flaws, not because the system was unjust. Wallerstein sees this as the latest step in a long tradition of disguising control as consensus. What unites these ideological stages is their function. Each served to justify the dominance of a few nations and classes over others. They made inequality seem natural, even desirable. And they did so by claiming to be

[118] Wallerstein, I. (2006) European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power. New York: The New Press.

universal—to speak for all of humanity when they really served narrow interests. Wallerstein proposes a different path: a universalism that is truly universal. This means moving beyond essentialist claims about civilisation, race, or development. It means recognising the validity of multiple ways of knowing and organising society. Rather than speaking for others, it would listen. It would build a world based on reciprocity, not domination. This is not merely a theoretical task. As the world faces growing instability—economic, environmental, political—the ideological systems of the past are breaking down. There is an opening. But without new ideas, old hierarchies will return in new forms. The challenge is not just to criticise Western power, but to replace its language of domination with one of true equality. The task is urgent. If universalism continues to be used as a mask for control, global justice will remain impossible. Only by exposing these rhetorical strategies can people begin to imagine another kind of world.

Manufacturing offense

The rhetoric of power often relies on the tactic of divide and rule. By stoking religious offense and moral panic, political actors manufacture hate not to defend faith but to fragment communities. Hatred becomes a deliberate tool—engineered to polarise, distract, and dismantle the very possibility of democratic dialogue. But in 'Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy[119]', Cherian George argues that many cases of religious outrage are not spontaneous expressions of deep belief but carefully planned political strategies. These acts, whether violent protests or legal complaints, often come from actors who want to use religious offense to silence opposition, control speech, and consolidate power. They are not expressions of genuine piety, but tools for political gain. George calls this tactic 'hate spin'. It combines hate speech—open attacks on identity—with the calculated staging of offense. This approach weaponises religious and cultural sensitivities, turning them into a means of influence. Hate spin is not accidental or emotional. It is coldly deliberate. It involves political leaders, clerics, and media figures who stir public sentiment to attack minorities, repress speech, or distract from broader failures. Examples from around the world show how hate spin works. In Myanmar, Buddhist leaders fuel anti-Muslim violence. In India and Pakistan, religious laws are used to target minorities. In the United States, provocative events targeting Islam are staged to prompt overreaction. The aim is to create the appearance of a culture war. Offense becomes political capital. This kind of manipulation harms democracy in two ways. First, it threatens equality by encouraging discrimination against religious or ethnic minorities. Second, it threatens liberty by pressuring governments to restrict speech, often in response to outrage that was manufactured in the first place. In this way, hate spin undermines both pillars of democracy—freedom and fairness. The legal response is complex. George explains that international human rights law, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), protects free expression but prohibits incitement to violence or discrimination. It draws a clear line: you may criticise religion but not incite harm to people. Some governments want to go further and ban offense to religion itself, but this opens the door to abuse. Laws against blasphemy, for instance, often end up punishing dissenters or minority groups. George warns against letting such laws become tools of repression. The goal should not be to protect ideas but to protect individuals. Human rights law insists that religious belief, while important, cannot override the rights of others. Respect for religion must not mean surrendering free speech. Democracies must find ways to protect citizens without enforcing religious doctrine. Hate spin thrives in divided societies and in media ecosystems driven by outrage. Social media

[119] George, C. (2016) Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy. MIT Press.

has made it easier to spread grievance and rally support. But democracies are not powerless. George argues for 'assertive pluralism'—a stance that defends free speech while also actively resisting hate. This includes clear laws, but also social and political leadership willing to confront hate spin publicly. The lesson is clear: offense is not always real, and speech is not always free. Those who pretend to defend faith often seek to control others. Democracies must not allow the politics of offense to silence the rule of law.

6.3. Corporate rhetoric

(The office tongue: Rhetoric in the age of bureaucratic capitalism)

'Corporate culture is the control of the soul. It seeks to manage not only what employees do, but who they are'.

André Spicer, The Stupidity Paradox

Reading smoke and mirrors

Corporate annual reports are supposed to inform. Instead, many of them mislead. Packed with glowing phrases, selective data, and technical language, these reports often paint a rosier picture than reality allows. According to Peter J. Hager 'Reading Smoke and Mirrors: The Rhetoric of Corporate Annual Reports[120]', companies use rhetorical tools not just to communicate, but to control perception. The gap between what readers expect—transparent financial insight—and what they receive—a curated image—creates frustration and mistrust. Despite spending billions collectively on these reports, many corporations still miss the mark. They often assume their audience is financially fluent. But not every shareholder or analyst is fluent in accounting jargon. This disconnect produces reports that are visually polished yet rhetorically confusing. Companies aim to project confidence and stability. In doing so, they sometimes obscure uncomfortable truths behind euphemisms, vague statements, or overwhelming data sets. One section that draws scrutiny is the Letter to Shareholders. Intended as a summary and message from leadership, it often avoids specifics. Students analysing these letters frequently find excessive optimism and evasive language. This section can serve more as a PR tool than a sincere update. The Review of Operations offers more substance but also more spin. Companies emphasise achievements and growth while glossing over challenges. Students learn to spot inconsistencies between glowing narratives and hard numbers. When aligned, rhetoric and reality can reinforce each other. When they diverge, trust erodes. The Notes to Financial Statements provide essential details that often go unread. Dense and technical, this section can hide key information in plain sight. Yet, when written clearly, it strengthens the report's credibility. Students are trained to decode these notes and determine whether they clarify or obscure. Equally important is the Management Discussion and Analysis (MD\&A) section. This is where executives explain what the numbers mean. A well-crafted MD\&A gives readers context and insight. A vague or evasive one raises red flags. Here, students assess whether companies are transparent about risk, failure, and strategy—or simply offering more smoke and mirrors. Audience analysis is central. Understanding who reads these reports—and how they process information—shapes whether communication succeeds or fails.

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[120] Hager, P. J. (1997) Reading Smoke and Mirrors: The Rhetoric of Corporate Annual Reports. In: Grabill, J. T. and Simmons, W. M. (eds) Critical Communication Studies. New York: State University of New York Press.

Overestimating financial literacy can alienate readers. Underestimating it can seem patronising. Striking the right balance is both an art and an ethical responsibility. Ethics plays a key role in this analysis. The line between persuasion and manipulation can be thin. Hager emphasises that rhetorical skill must be tempered by integrity. Reports that shape reality through selective language may achieve short-term goals. But they also risk long-term damage to credibility. In the end, reading a corporate report becomes more than decoding data. It becomes a lesson in language, power, and ethics. By studying these texts closely, students learn how words shape trust—and how easily that trust can be bent or broken.

Doubt as a product

In 1980, hundreds of children fell ill from Reye's syndrome. Many died. The cause was traced to aspirin, yet it took years before warning labels were added. The companies knew there was a risk, but they insisted the science was not yet clear. They delayed regulation by questioning the evidence, funding alternative studies, and casting doubt on the medical consensus. Their public relations campaigns stressed that no medication had been 'proven' to cause Reye's. This was not science—it was strategy. David Michaels argues in 'Doubt Is Their Product[121]' that this tactic is not limited to aspirin makers. It has become a standard method across industries to avoid responsibility. The method is simple: manufacture uncertainty. Rather than prove their products safe, corporations focus on discrediting the science that shows harm. Michaels points out that this approach was perfected by Big Tobacco. In a 1969 internal memo, a tobacco executive wrote, 'Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the body of fact'. This memo captures the essence of modern corporate defence. Instead of confronting evidence, industries demand more of it. They push for unattainable standards of certainty, knowing that science, by nature, rarely claims to be absolute. Through legal teams, consultants, and think tanks, they question studies, promote their own research, and redefine the terms of debate. These efforts create the appearance of controversy, even when the science is settled. The result is delay—delay in regulation, delay in public awareness, and delay in accountability. Often industries resisted regulation, not by offering better science, but by undermining existing knowledge. They funded studies designed to obscure links between exposure and illness. They pressured agencies to ignore expert recommendations. They argued that until there was complete certainty, no action should be taken. This tactic has far-reaching consequences. Whether it is climate change, workplace safety, or food additives, the pattern is the same. Public health is sidelined in favour of profit. Regulatory agencies are weakened. Scientists are discredited. And the public, caught in the fog of competing claims, is left confused and unprotected. So, this is not a scientific debate. It is a political and economic battle fought with the tools of science, but not its principles. Doubt is not a byproduct of honest inquiry. It is, increasingly, a product deliberately made and sold. The lesson of this book is stark. When science is manipulated, the consequences are real: people stay sick, workers stay exposed, and the environment stays polluted. The question is not whether there is enough proof to act. The real question is: who benefits when society waits?

Doubt manufacture

Some industries have learnt to delay regulation not by denying facts outright but by creating confusion. In the tobacco and fossil fuel sectors, this tactic has been especially effective. Companies fund studies, support scientists with friendly views, and release polished

[121] Michaels, D. (2008) Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health. Oxford University Press.

reports. The goal is not to inform but to make people unsure. If citizens doubt the science, then governments hesitate to regulate. Yann Bramoullé and Caroline Orset present a model to explain this behaviour. In their study 'Manufacturing Doubt[122]', they show how businesses strategically mislead the public to protect their profits. The process begins with genuine scientific uncertainty. Scientists try to study the real effects of environmental harm. But while this work unfolds, firms step in to shape the public narrative. They publish reports that look scientific but are designed to mislead. These industry-sponsored studies are often hard to distinguish from legitimate research. The public, facing both kinds of information, struggles to know what is true. And because many governments are sensitive to popular opinion, they often base policy on what people believe—not on what scientists say. This creates a strange situation where both the government and industry benefit from public doubt. Firms avoid costly regulation, and leaders avoid making tough decisions. Bramoullé and Orset's model reveals that miscommunication is not always steady. When early scientific findings begin to suggest environmental harm, companies ramp up their misinformation efforts. They try hard to drown out early warnings. But when the scientific consensus becomes overwhelming, they often give up suddenly. At that point, further resistance only damages their credibility. The kind of regulation matters too. If the government enforces strict limits on emissions, firms face high compliance costs but may find fewer reasons to lie. But when the penalty is a financial tax, companies may have a stronger incentive to distort public understanding. Taxes hit profits directly, so firms fight back with greater miscommunication. Another important point is the role of research funding. Governments that want to appear effective may choose not to invest too heavily in science, fearing that stronger data might provoke backlash or force difficult reforms. On the other hand, independent agencies—like the National Science Foundation—may overcompensate and fund too much research, hoping to drown out corporate influence. Either way, the funding decisions themselves affect the level of industry manipulation. The lesson is clear. To protect public trust and ensure sound policy, stronger safeguards are needed. Transparency in research funding, independent review of scientific claims, and thoughtful regulatory design all help reduce the space for corporate miscommunication. What this model offers is a sobering look at how knowledge is shaped not just by discovery but by power. Doubt, in this context, is not a sign of honest scepticism. It is a product—manufactured, distributed, and sold to delay action.

Distract, delay, disrupt

In their article 'Distract, delay, disrupt: examples of manufactured doubt from five industries[123]', Rebecca F. Goldberg and Laura N. Vandenberg explore how major corporations systematically manipulate scientific knowledge to delay regulation and protect profits. These efforts, often well-funded and highly strategic, are not simply disagreements over evidence but calculated campaigns to create confusion and weaken public trust in science. The authors examine five industries—tobacco, coal, sugar, agrochemicals, and fossil fuels—to show how each developed methods to distract the public, delay accountability, and disrupt scientific consensus. The tobacco industry laid the foundation. As early as the 1950s, internal documents

[122] Bramoullé, Y. and Orset, C. (2023) Manufacturing doubt: Industry miscommunication, scientific uncertainty, and public policy. Journal of Public Economics.

[123] Goldberg, R.F. and Vandenberg, L.N. (2019). Distract, delay, disrupt: examples of manufactured doubt from five industries. Reviews on Environmental Health, [online] 34(4), pp.349–363. doi:https://doi.org/10.1515/reveh-2019-0004.

revealed a clear strategy: create doubt, not deny facts. A 1969 memo stated plainly, 'Doubt is our product'. Tobacco companies funded research designed to counter emerging evidence about smoking's health risks. They paid scientists to challenge findings, promoted alternative explanations for disease, and portrayed concerns as unsettled science. This gave the appearance of debate where there was scientific agreement. It worked. Regulations were postponed, public confusion spread, and millions continued to smoke unaware of the real dangers. The coal industry took a similar path. Miners suffering from black lung disease faced not only corporate indifference but active obstruction. Coal companies hired doctors who downplayed symptoms and contested diagnoses. Legal teams buried medical evidence and used complex court procedures to delay compensation. The legal concept of 'true doubt'—requiring absolute proof before action—was exploited to discredit legitimate claims. The result was prolonged suffering for workers and minimal accountability for employers. In the case of sugar, the approach was more subtle but just as damaging. In the 1960s and 70s, research began linking sugar consumption to heart disease and obesity. The sugar industry responded by funding studies that shifted the blame onto dietary fat. This narrative quickly took hold in public health messaging. Government guidelines began emphasising fat reduction, while sugar escaped scrutiny. Food companies reformulated products to be 'low-fat', often replacing fats with sugar. The public followed suit, unknowingly increasing sugar intake under the impression they were eating healthier. This misdirection shaped decades of nutritional advice and contributed to growing rates of obesity and metabolic disorders. Syngenta, the agrochemical giant, went a step further. When biologist Tyrone Hayes published studies linking the herbicide atrazine to reproductive harm in frogs, the company did not just dispute the findings—they went after the scientist himself. Internal documents revealed efforts to monitor Hayes, pressure his university, and plant critical stories in the media. Meanwhile, Syngenta flooded the scientific literature with studies designed to contradict or obscure Hayes's results. The campaign was not about resolving a debate. It was about silencing dissent and preserving a product's market viability. Climate change denial, perhaps the most widespread example, was led in part by the George C. Marshall Institute. Founded during the Cold War, the Institute later turned its attention to environmental science. Borrowing tactics from the tobacco playbook, its members—many of whom had ties to industry—challenged the growing consensus on global warming. They emphasised scientific uncertainty, cherry-picked data, and lobbied journalists to give 'both sides' equal weight. This created a false balance in the media, leading many to believe that the science was unsettled. Their influence extended into politics, slowing action on climate policies and framing environmental regulation as a threat to economic freedom. These cases show a consistent pattern. Industry actors manufacture doubt to shield themselves from accountability. They fund biased research, discredit independent experts, manipulate public opinion, and obstruct legal processes. The goal is not to find truth but to create enough confusion to stall action. This tactic undermines scientific integrity and endangers public health and safety.

Non-authentic advocacy

More brands are stepping into the spotlight, making statements on political and social issues. Some do this because it aligns with who they are. Others do it to stay relevant or attract attention. The question that matters now is: are these brands truly invested in change, or are they just performing? In 'Brand Activism: Authentic Advocacy or Woke Washing?[124]' Jessica Vredenburg and her colleagues explore this growing phenomenon in their study. They show

[124] Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A. and Kemper, J.A. (2020) Brand Activism: Authentic Advocacy or Woke Washing? Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39(4), pp.444–460.

how brand activism can be powerful when it fits with a company's values and practices. But when it is disconnected—when the talk does not match the walk—it becomes what many now call woke washing. That is, using social causes as marketing tools without making real changes behind the scenes. Consumers are watching closely. They expect companies to stand for something, but they also expect consistency. The Gillette campaign against toxic masculinity sparked debate. Some applauded it, while others pointed out the company's pricing double standards. Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick drew both praise and protest. Ben & Jerry's, on the other hand, was widely trusted because its activism was not new—it reflected decades of similar actions. The authors offer a helpful way to think about this. They create a framework with four categories. First is authentic activism, where brands match strong messaging with real, supportive practices. Second is silent activism, where the company does the work but does not make much noise about it. Then there is no activism—companies that avoid social issues altogether. Finally, there is woke washing—loud claims without action. Misalignment can backfire. When people feel manipulated, they turn away. Empty slogans and flashy ads are not enough. What matters is whether a brand takes meaningful action. This includes internal policies, long-term commitments, and actual resources devoted to causes. Interestingly, the authors argue that a bit of mismatch—what they call moderate incongruence—can be useful. A brand might not have a long history with a certain cause but can still take a stand and grow into that space. What is dangerous is jumping in too quickly or superficially. The Pepsi protest ad with Kendall Jenner is a well-known example of getting it wrong. So, what can brands do? They can set clear goals. Instead of saying 'we care', they can say 'we're investing this much in this cause'. Independent certifications can also help. Groups like B Corp give consumers confidence that the brand is not just talking. In the end, consumers are becoming more aware, more sceptical, and more demanding. Brands cannot afford to fake it. If they want to lead with purpose, they need to show up with substance. Otherwise, their messages will ring hollow, and trust will be lost.

Corporate advocacy

Corporate advocacy is a form of strategic communication used by companies to influence how they are seen by the public, policy-makers, and even their own employees. It combines elements of advertising, public relations, and lobbying. But more than selling products, it sells values, defends reputations, and promotes positions on public issues. In 'Corporate Advocacy: Rhetoric in the Information Age[125]' Judith D. Hoover brings together different perspectives to explore how companies use advocacy to shape debates and protect their interests. There are several key types of corporate advocacy. One is economic justification, where a business defends its financial actions—like explaining layoffs or tax strategies. Another is corporate storytelling, which relies on narratives to make a company seem human, ethical, and community-minded. A third type focuses on managing public issues and policy risks. And the last is crisis management, where advocacy becomes a tool to protect reputations during scandals or accidents. Advocacy works both inside and outside the company. Internally, it shapes employee loyalty and workplace culture. Externally, it helps companies position themselves as responsible actors. For example, when Nike backed Colin Kaepernick, it was not just a marketing decision. It was a form of advocacy that sparked a global conversation and reinforced the company's brand identity. Argumentation theory, especially Kenneth Burke's dramatistic model, offers a useful way to understand how advocacy works. Every act of corporate advocacy involves a scene (the political or cultural context), an agent (the person or group speaking), an

[125] Hoover, J.D. (ed.) (1997) Corporate Advocacy: Rhetoric in the Information Age. Westport: Praeger.

act (the message itself), agency (the medium used), and a purpose (what the company wants to achieve). This model helps show that advocacy is not just about facts—it is about the motives and values behind them. Burke's categories also show how advocacy can be driven by different worldviews. Some companies focus on economic survival (materialism), others on tools and strategies (pragmatism), and some on ideals or personalities (idealism). Sometimes, advocacy is even wrapped in moral or spiritual language, turning profit-making into a kind of social mission. Corporate advocacy is not without risk. When done poorly or dishonestly, it backfires. If a company claims to care about the environment but pollutes rivers, the public will notice. And once trust is broken, it is hard to rebuild. Advocacy can also draw backlash, especially when it touches on divisive topics or appears opportunistic. In the end, advocacy is not just a tool for communication—it is a tool for power. Its effectiveness depends on how well it reflects a company's real actions and values. Used responsibly, it can shape public conversations and drive positive change. Used cynically, it becomes another way to manipulate opinion and protect corporate interests.

Shared value creation

In 'Corporate Innovation Strategies: Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value Creation[126]' by Nacer Gasmi argues that modern corporate innovation is no longer solely driven by profit. It is about building strategies that include social and environmental concerns. Businesses are no longer judged solely on financial performance. Consumers expect companies to take responsibility for their broader impact. The idea that companies should care for society is not new, but it has become more urgent. Modern CSR combines ethics, sustainability, and strategy. The focus is on reducing harm while creating shared value for both business and society. Since the mid-20th century, corporations have helped drive global growth. They have created jobs and contributed to public services through taxes. But this growth has often come with side effects—pollution, layoffs, and inequality. Many companies have now begun shifting from reactive CSR—responding to laws and crises—to more proactive approaches. They aim to align their core values with their impact on society. Lars Rebien Sorensen, former CEO of Novo Nordisk, stated that social and environmental problems eventually become financial problems. His point reflects how social responsibility now ties into long-term success. The concept of shared value (CSV), developed by Porter and Kramer, links business success to solving social problems. This is not charity. It is about recognising that business and society depend on each other. Companies that address social needs can uncover new markets, reduce risk, and build trust. Today, even small businesses are feeling this pressure. They are expected to measure their impact and show how they benefit society beyond their bottom line. Corporate innovation now means adapting to these expectations. Companies develop strategies that reduce negative externalities and create public benefits. They adopt new business models. Some repair past damage. Others innovate through new products. Some build entirely new businesses focused on sustainability. Impact investing helps measure success not just in profits, but in social value. This shift demands clearer metrics and stronger partnerships between businesses and other institutions. Two views shape how businesses approach CSR. One sees profit as the only goal, leaving social issues to governments. The other, more modern view sees CSR as a smart business strategy. Companies that ignore social problems may face public backlash, legal pressure, or lose customer trust. Those that act early often gain an advantage. CSR strategies are not only about doing good—they are about avoiding harm. Activist pressure, public opinion,

[126] Gasmi, N. (2021) Corporate Innovation Strategies: Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value Creation. Springer.

and media exposure push companies to be more transparent. Regulatory bodies set hard rules, but businesses are also shaped by soft power: values, trust, and expectations. Companies that lead on CSR often help shape the rules themselves. Today, large businesses have influence equal to some governments. That power comes with responsibility. When states fail to lead, corporations may step in, as seen after the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. CSR becomes not just a legal duty but a moral and strategic one. It is a way for businesses to stay relevant, trusted, and resilient in a changing world.

Corporate dialogue

In 'Corporate Rhetoric Participates in Public Dialogue: A Solution to the Public/Private Conundrum[127]' Josh Boyd presents corporate rhetoric as a potential remedy to the longstanding tension between private interests and public discourse. Corporate rhetoric is often criticised as a private force interfering with public dialogue. But this view oversimplifies how organisations operate and communicate in modern society. The idea that public and private discourse are clearly separate no longer holds. Instead, corporations have become part of the public conversation, shaping and being shaped by societal concerns. Critics argued that corporate language undermines democratic exchange by promoting self-interest over the common good. They suggest that the public sphere has been reduced to a competition of private agendas. But this perspective assumes too much. It ignores the way many public institutions rely on private influence, just as corporations engage in public-facing communication. The boundaries between sectors are far more entangled. Companies speak to more than shareholders. They must address employees, consumers, regulators, and communities. Their rhetoric is not always profit-driven. It often reflects social responsibility, environmental goals, or labour ethics. These efforts show that businesses are not only economic actors but social ones too. Their communication reaches into public life, shaping how issues are discussed and framed. Scholars such as Cheney point out that organisational rhetoric differs from individual speech. Corporations manage many voices. They navigate competing interests while projecting unity. The collective 'we' in corporate language hides the complexity inside. This challenges traditional rhetorical criticism, which is more comfortable analysing personal speech. But institutions speak too—and their voices matter. Looking at examples helps make this clearer. Utility companies are private businesses but serve public needs. The CIA is a public agency that operates in secrecy. Amtrak is a government-owned company that runs on a business model. Even airlines can become public concerns during crises. These cases show that public and private categories often break down in practice. A key example is the military-industrial complex. Companies like Boeing and Lockheed Martin are private, but they work almost entirely for the state. They influence military policy and supply arms. Their rhetoric is not just commercial—it is deeply political. These firms do not fit neatly into either box. They operate in the space between. When critics reject corporate speech outright, they risk missing how companies influence policy and respond to public demands. Not all corporate rhetoric is manipulative. Some of it engages meaningfully with democratic issues. The task is to judge whether corporate messages help or harm public discourse. Are they transparent? Do they allow debate? Do they serve the public interest? Corporations do respond to public pressure. Media attention, activism, and consumer behaviour all shape how they communicate. Commitments to ethical sourcing or climate action may be

[127] Boyd, J. (2001). Corporate rhetoric participates in public dialogue: A solution to the public/private conundrum. The Southern Communication Journal, 66(4), pp.279–292. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940109373207.

strategic—but they are still responses. If corporate rhetoric were purely private, it would not react to these pressures. The challenge is to move beyond outdated labels. Instead of asking whether rhetoric is public or private, ask what it does. Does it inform? Does it hide? Does it enable or silence? These questions lead to better analysis and greater accountability. Corporate rhetoric is part of public life. It should not be dismissed. It should be studied, questioned, and held to ethical standards. In doing so, it can be made to serve the public good. Corporate speech can bridge the gap between private interest and public discourse—but in practice, it often reshapes dialogue on corporate terms, leaving the public to follow rather than lead. Today's public dialogue unfolds entirely within corporate frameworks, as the very spaces once thought to be public—plazas, streets, media platforms, and digital forums—are owned, curated, and monetised by corporations. In such a landscape, there is no dialogue outside corporate dialogue, only echoes within its branded walls.

Corporate social responsibility

'Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe: Rhetoric and Realities[128]', edited by Regine Barth, follows how CSR, has become a central topic in discussions about sustainability across Europe. Unlike the largely voluntary approach common in Anglo-American contexts, CSR in Europe often blends voluntary actions with regulatory expectations. Businesses are expected to contribute not only to economic performance but also to environmental protection and social equity. In this context, CSR serves both as a business strategy and as a tool for broader governance. European companies operate within a complex system of legal rules, consumer expectations, and political frameworks. CSR emerges at the intersection of these forces. It covers a wide range of practices, from non-financial reporting to ethical labour standards and community engagement. However, the most important question remains whether CSR actions result in measurable improvements in sustainability or remain superficial gestures designed to polish a company's image. The research presented in Regine Barth's collection focuses on evaluating CSR's effectiveness across various sectors. It finds that CSR is widespread in principle but uneven in practice. Many companies declare commitments to sustainability, but their ability to translate these into real change differs. For example, banks and oil companies report using many CSR tools, but the depth of their implementation varies. Sectors such as fisheries and small manufacturers tend to do less, due to limited resources and lower public scrutiny. Several factors determine the actual impact of CSR. One is visibility—issues like carbon emissions and workplace diversity are easier to measure, making progress more tangible. In contrast, efforts like anti-corruption are harder to track because success often means the absence of wrongdoing, not visible change. Another factor is alignment with business strategy. Companies are more likely to act when CSR supports their core interests, such as sustainable sourcing in seafood industries or green energy in the oil sector. Corporate control over the issues also matters. It is easier for firms to reduce internal emissions than to change supplier behaviour or customer habits. Likewise, external pressure from civil society, investors, or regulators plays a role. The more public attention an issue receives, the more likely companies are to address it seriously. In areas with weak advocacy or unclear metrics, CSR efforts tend to be weaker or more symbolic. The study also highlights the importance of the broader regulatory environment. In tightly regulated areas, CSR often reinforces existing laws rather than creating new practices. But in loosely governed areas, voluntary corporate action can fill important gaps. This suggests that CSR works best when it complements, rather than substitutes for, public policy. Despite its promise, CSR remains uneven in practice. Some

[128] Barth, R. (ed.) (2007) Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe: Rhetoric and Realities.

companies make real progress; others engage in greenwashing. The challenge for both researchers and policymakers is to distinguish between surface-level commitments and meaningful change. Governments can help by setting clearer rules, offering incentives, and improving transparency standards. CSR is not just a communication tool. It is a mechanism through which businesses participate in solving societal problems. But for it to work, it must be judged by results, not just rhetoric.

'Wordwashing' culture

In 'Greenwashing Culture[129]', Toby Miller exposes how language has become a tool for disguising environmental harm under a veil of ecological concern. At the heart of the issue lies the appropriation of sustainability rhetoric by corporations and cultural institutions. Words like 'green', 'sustainable', or 'eco-friendly' no longer guarantee meaningful action. Instead, they often serve as public relations smokescreens, distracting from ongoing environmental destruction. This use of language to mislead and manipulate—what might be called 'wordwashing'—is central to the broader pattern of greenwashing. Greenwashing operates within the framework of capitalist expansion. It is not a mistake or a marginal practice; it is a calculated response to public concern. Companies do not need to change their behaviour if they can change their story. A rebranding campaign costs less than reconfiguring a supply chain. By telling a new story—one in which a polluting company becomes a green champion—corporations retain power, evade regulation, and sustain profit. Miller points to BP's rebranding as 'Beyond Petroleum' as a perfect example. While the slogan suggested radical change, the company's core business remained oil extraction. Renewable investments were token gestures. The story shifted; the substance did not. This manipulation extends far beyond corporate logos. Cultural institutions, including museums, universities, and festivals, participate in this rhetorical laundering. By accepting sponsorships from oil companies or mining firms, these institutions help whitewash reputations. The public sees a museum exhibit on climate change sponsored by a fossil fuel giant and interprets it as evidence of progress. But what really happens is the transformation of critique into spectacle. The arts, which should challenge dominant narratives, become tools for distraction. Culture itself is repurposed to shield the status quo. Greenwashing is effective because it works through language and image. It creates the appearance of change without requiring transformation. It promises responsibility while continuing exploitation. Its greatest success is not in misleading regulators, but in shaping public feeling. The audience wants to believe. People are tired of doom and eager for solutions. Greenwashing provides the comfort of action without its cost. It turns climate concern into consumer preference. Yet Miller makes clear that this is not just about deceptive branding. It reveals deeper ideological commitments. Modern economies are built on the assumption of endless growth and extraction. Greenwashing allows that myth to persist. If capitalism can speak the language of ecology, it can pretend to be compatible with planetary limits. But the reality is otherwise. No amount of green vocabulary will reverse climate breakdown if the material foundations remain untouched. To counter this, a cultural shift is needed. Environmentalism cannot be reduced to logos and slogans. It must challenge the structures that produce environmental harm. This includes questioning the role of culture itself. Museums, artists, academics, and media professionals must choose whether to confront the illusions they have helped construct or continue to offer distractions. Miller's call is not only for policy reform but for a transformation of values. Real sustainability will come when language and action align—when words do not hide destruction but describe genuine repair. Until then, greenwashing will remain a symptom of a system unwilling to change.

[129] Reference: Miller, T. (2018) Greenwashing Culture. London: Routledge.

Greenwashing, like every form of earlier whitewashing, is just another chapter in a long history of "wordwashing," where carefully chosen words replace the actions they pretend to describe.

7. WRITING

7.1. Written language

(The visible shape of thought: Writing and its civilising force)

'Writing is a technology that restructures thought'.

Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy

'The invention of writing was the beginning of history'.

Jean Bottéro, Mesopotamia

From speech to writing

In 'The Tongues of Men and Speech[130]', J. R. Firth explores the social and contextual nature of language, emphasising that meaning arises not from isolated words but from their function within specific cultural and communicative situations. Language has always been more than a tool. Across different ages and cultures, it has been seen as divine, creative, and sometimes magical. In ancient civilisations, language carried the weight of religion, myth, and power. Egyptian priests believed that naming something brought it into being. Thoth, their god of writing, ruled over both order and chaos through speech. The Hindus saw Vak, or speech, as a force of the universe—speech was creation itself, not just its description. In Greece, Plato and Aristotle asked if words had natural ties to meaning or if those links were arbitrary. Aristotle's method of analysing speech—breaking it into functions and parts—shaped how Europe would study language for centuries. The Romans picked up this thread. Quintilian, a Roman educator, treated language as a social act shaped by usage, not fixed rules. For him, grammar followed people, not the other way around. Religious traditions gave language a sacred quality. Jewish scholars explored Hebrew in relation to its Semitic relatives, seeking meaning in its patterns. Christian efforts to spread doctrine led missionaries to learn and transcribe dozens of unwritten languages. Their work, often aimed at biblical translation, became an early form of comparative linguistics. Later, language study shifted into scientific mode. In the modern era, with tools like behaviourism and neurology, scholars began to treat speech as something physical, a matter of brain and body. Reflex theory reduced language to a series of responses. But even as this view took hold, older beliefs about the mystical or persuasive power of words remained alive. Advertising, propaganda, even courtroom language—each still relies on the ancient faith that words shape the world. Firth believed speech must be understood not as a list of words or rules, but as something humans do. Speech is action. It comes from the body. People do not just speak to express thoughts—they speak to exist among others, to move through the world. The voice

[130] Firth, J. R. (1937) The Tongues of Men and Speech. London: Oxford University Press.

is breath shaped into meaning, passed between people in a loop of listening and responding. From infancy, humans build language through interaction. A baby does not mimic—it experiments, listens, repeats. Speech becomes muscle memory. The ear adjusts, the mouth learns. And every person, no matter how fluent in one language, still lives among many—languages of reading, writing, hearing, and speaking. Each tongue adds a layer to the Babel of modern identity. Firth rejected simple origin stories. Speech did not come from mimicry or exclamation. It grew from the body's need to act, the group's need to coordinate, and the brain's need to interpret. To study language is to study behaviour. It is not a code but a habit. It exists in time, in movement, in response. Language is not still. It is something people do together, again. The transition from speech to writing was slow because speech is lived, shared, and embodied—while writing is removed, abstract, and solitary. With the invention of writing, language ceased to be something fleeting between bodies and became something fixed in space. This shift was accelerated by printing, which turned language into mass-replicable text, further detaching it from its origins in voice and presence. While language is a collective act, writing is often an individual one. This is the paradox of writing: it preserves speech by separating it from speakers. A technology of permanence, writing unites minds across time while isolating them in the moment. Ultimately writing is a technology of alienation.

History of writing

In 'A History of Writing[131]', Steven Roger Fischer traces the development of writing from its earliest forms to its potential future as a global system. He begins with the birth of writing around 3700 BC, when images evolved into signs that could represent not only objects but also sounds. This shift, led by the Sumerians through the rebus principle, allowed pictograms to stand for spoken syllables and words. It marked a key transformation—writing no longer simply illustrated the world but began to express human speech. From the beginning, writing was shaped by the needs and beliefs of societies. In Mesopotamia, cuneiform developed from simple drawings into a wedge-based script used on clay tablets. It started as a tool for accounting but expanded to include literature, law, and religion. In Egypt, hieroglyphs were seen as divine gifts, used for sacred and official inscriptions. Over time, they were adapted into quicker cursive scripts for everyday use. Despite these different paths, both systems were deeply connected to speech and ritual, and both became central to the organisation of their respective civilisations. Fischer shows that writing systems can be complete even when they do not record every detail of speech. Scripts like rongorongo or the early Chinese divination texts may seem limited, but within their own cultural frameworks, they were sufficient for preserving knowledge, memory, and power. What matters is not how much a script captures, but how it functions in society. The spread of writing across regions—from the Iranian plateau to the Indus Valley—shows how flexible these systems were. Some remain undeciphered, yet they reveal a shared belief in writing as a tool of authority and administration. As societies grew more complex, writing kept pace, adapting to trade, bureaucracy, and belief. In the second half of the book, Fischer turns to the present and future. Writing systems, he argues, survive not because of their efficiency but due to the political, social, and cultural power of those who use them. The Roman alphabet, for instance, has become dominant not because it is better than others, but because it is linked to empires, global commerce, and now, digital technology. Computers were built on Latin-script infrastructure, and this has pushed many cultures to adopt or adapt to it. The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how politics shape writing. Over the 20th century, its people shifted from Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and now back to Latin—each change reflecting shifts in power and

[131] Fischer, S. R. (2001) A History of Writing. London: Reaktion Books.

identity. Such changes are rarely about ease of use; they reflect deeper struggles over culture, modernity, and belonging. Fischer predicts a future where fewer scripts remain. A global 'world script', based on the Latin alphabet, may become standard. While this might seem like a loss, he suggests it could also preserve languages by giving them access to digital tools and global communication. Writing is more than code; it is memory, identity, and the visible shape of thought. Even if technologies shift toward speech or automation, the act of writing will remain one of the central expressions of human culture.

From pen to press to pixel

From sacred scrolls to digital code, writing has evolved from gesture to machine, shaping not only how humans communicate—but who they become. When the word left the tongue and took to paper, it found power—but lost its breath. Writing is not merely the recording of spoken language; it is a distinct system with its own history, rules, and consequences. While people often refer to 'written language' as a singular phenomenon, they typically mean printed language—that is, typography. In modern contexts, this term increasingly includes digital writing as well. Yet these forms are not interchangeable. The shift from handwriting to print, and from print to screen, marks more than a change in technology—it signals a transformation in how language is experienced, understood, and socially distributed. Handwriting is intimate and variable. Each pen stroke reflects a body behind the words, a rhythm shaped by the writer's hand and breath. Before printing, manuscripts were laboriously copied and illuminated, each text bearing traces of individual presence. Monks read aloud as they wrote, embedding voice into script. Manuscript culture was slow, embodied, and often communal. Its margins were spaces for commentary, not fixed barriers. In contrast, typography introduced uniformity and speed. With Gutenberg's movable type, words lost their tactile uniqueness and became reproducible units. Printed pages stripped writing of gesture and replaced vocal rhythm with visual order. This shift created new habits of silence, solitude, and linear attention—what Marshall McLuhan described as the birth of the 'typographic man'. Typography turned writing into a mechanical force. It encouraged classification, fixity, and specialisation. Laws, science, and national literature could be standardised. Individual authors emerged, as did the idea of a stable, authoritative text. Unlike the fluidity of handwriting or speech, print demanded consistency. The reader became isolated, a silent interpreter of uniform marks, detached from the speaker or writer's body. This detachment helped foster abstract thought, national consciousness, and bureaucratic organisation. Yet it also introduced a new rigidity. Print did not merely preserve meaning; it froze it. Errors became permanent. Interpretation narrowed. The dominance of typographic language reshaped not only knowledge but also the very structure of human identity. With digital writing, the terrain shifts again. Screens blur the line between writer and reader, between publishing and conversation. Text becomes clickable, searchable, and ephemeral. Algorithms rank it, while platforms fragment and filter it. Emojis and hashtags restore some elements of gesture and tone, but digital text is not a return to orality—it is a hybrid. Digital writing extends the logic of print into new territories of surveillance, speed, and simulation. Yet it retains the same function: to encode human thought, transmit authority, and shape perception. When we speak of written language today, we often overlook this history. We speak of writing as if it were neutral, but it is anything but. Writing systems—from cuneiform to cursive to code—are technologies. They organise thought, but also power. The transition from oral to written, from handwritten to printed, and now to digital writing, reveals how language technologies mediate access to knowledge, shape institutions, and define human relationships. McLuhan warned that each medium reconfigures not only what people say, but how they think and feel. Literacy may empower, but it also excludes.

Typographic systems served empires and nation-states as much as poets and scholars. Today's digital scripts serve global corporations as well as communities. Writing is thus never just words on a surface—it is a way of seeing, a way of ordering the world. It determines who is heard and how long their voice lasts. Whether carved, printed, or coded, writing does not merely reflect thought—it produces it.

How writing rewrote the human self

When man carved words into silence, he lost his voice but gained a mirror. Writing did not merely give humans a tool—it gave them a new identity. Typography fractured the unity of the senses, replacing the echo of shared speech with silent lines of print. Before Gutenberg, people lived in an audible-tactile world where architecture, sculpture, and spoken language formed a resonant cultural whole. Reading aloud was communal, embodying rhythm, memory, and physical presence. But with print came interiority, isolation, and abstraction. Reading became silent and passive, voices faded, and sculpture and public art lost their function as focal points of speech. Typographic man was born—visually biased, linearly trained, and psychologically fragmented. This transformation remade the very idea of selfhood. Once positioned at the centre of creation, man was soon decentralised—displaced by Copernicus in space, Darwin in time, and Freud in consciousness. The notion of a continuous, rational world collapsed under the weight of relativity and quantum theory. The alphabet had once helped create fictional Euclidean space; print hardened it into dogma. In turn, modern physics shattered it, replacing cause with configuration and rendering visual homogeneity obsolete. Writing also restructured power and knowledge. The book became not only a repository of ideas but also a force of cultural hegemony. Its linear form encouraged classification, compartmentalisation, and specialism, making disconnected thinking appear rational. This segregation of disciplines, as Whittaker showed, led science to describe rather than explain, mimicking Newton's technique of detached prediction. Print made science possible, but also dulled sensibility, detaching the mind from lived experience. Scholars like Leibnitz feared this 'indefinite multitude of authors', foreseeing that the flood of books would stifle discovery, dilute knowledge, and turn authorship into vanity. The printed book replaced conversation with monologue, oral reasoning with visual proof. What began as a tool to illuminate understanding ended by obscuring its roots. A line of ink became the world's new spine. The transformation from oral to typographic culture was not simply a change in medium—it was a reprogramming of human consciousness. Man did not just use writing; writing remade man. Marshall McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' reveals how writing, and especially the invention of movable type, profoundly reshaped human experience by shifting perception from an oral-tactile world to a visual-linear one. Men, once immersed in tribal soundscapes where language resonated communally, became isolated individuals governed by silent reading, fragmented vision, and sequential logic. Typography did not just store knowledge—it reprogrammed the senses, privileging sight over touch and hearing. This reorganisation altered not only thought but identity: the oral man, defined by participation, became the literate man, defined by detachment. The alphabet abstracted sound into visible characters; print standardised these characters into repeatable units; and the printed book imposed uniform time, space, and individuality. As this visual bias intensified, so did hierarchical structures—fixed points of view, private property, nationalism, and the division of knowledge into specialised disciplines. Masculinity itself was recoded: from ritual performance to rational control, from embodied memory to disembodied abstraction. McLuhan traces how the medieval singing booth became the silent carrel, how the oral teacher became the solitary author, and how the tribal elder became the professional specialist. Writing, especially typography, did not simply transmit

culture—it dislocated the male self from communal being and installed him as sovereign observer. Yet with the rise of electronic media, McLuhan suggests, this visual regime is collapsing. The retribalisation of the global village threatens the stability print once provided. The question is not whether man will return to myth, but whether he can recognise how deeply technology has already rewritten him.

Writing meaningfully

In 'A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing[132]', Alec King explores how language shapes thought, identity, and power. His central claim is that language instruction should do more than teach grammar or composition; it should encourage students to think clearly and critically. Writing, for King, is not just a means of expression—it is a process of thought itself. He warns that without meaningful engagement, writing becomes empty, reduced to formulaic exercises that stifle curiosity rather than develop it. Teachers must create an environment where students are free to question, argue, and explore. In doing so, language becomes a tool for reflection, not just a skill to be mastered. King also investigates how words gain meaning. Language is not a transparent medium; it operates through associations. A word like 'melons' means something only because it has been linked, repeatedly, to a particular object and set of experiences. This connection is never fixed. Meaning varies depending on personal context, cultural background, and emotional memory. For King, this makes communication inherently fragile. It relies on a shared set of associations that may not always hold. When discussing abstract ideas like justice or freedom, people may use the same words while imagining entirely different things. Yet language still functions, because within a cultural group, enough overlap exists to create understanding. Still, King stresses that recognising the instability of meaning is vital for anyone hoping to write or speak clearly. The book also explores metaphor and simile—not as literary flourishes, but as essential tools of thought. They allow people to grasp what is unfamiliar by comparing it to what is known. A metaphor like 'time is a river' condenses emotion and concept into a single image. It communicates movement, loss, and continuity all at once. For King, metaphors are not optional decorations; they are part of how humans understand the world. This is especially true in literature and philosophy, where metaphors often carry more weight than definitions. Even science, despite its pursuit of precision, occasionally leans on metaphor when direct description fails. King argues that mastering metaphor is part of mastering thought. Alongside King’s analysis, Steven Roger Fischer’s 'A History of Reading' provides a broader historical context for literacy and the written word. He shows how books, once rare and revered objects, became instruments of mass communication. From Emerson’s idea of sacred reading to the rise of the printing press, Fischer traces how reading changed from an elite ritual to a universal activity. This shift helped fuel social movements, revolutions, and the growth of industrial society. Yet with the rise of mass media, concerns emerged about the quality of reading. Was it possible to read too much, too fast, or without thought? Critics like Alexander Pope feared that access to books did not guarantee wisdom. The spread of reading, like language itself, could be liberating or misleading, depending on how it was used. Language, then, is never neutral. It shapes perception, guides action and distributes power. To write well is to think well. To read carefully is to resist manipulation. As both King and Fischer show, the control of language is not merely academic—it is political and personal, essential to freedom and meaning in modern life.

[132] King, A. (1980) A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing. London: Oxford University Press.

Silent triumph of the written word

As speech gave way to writing, memory moved from the living body to the silent page. In seeking to preserve knowledge, people began to lose touch with the immediacy and depth of lived experience. Marshall McLuhan's investigation into the transition from oral to literate and ultimately to typographic culture unveils a fundamental transformation in human consciousness. Before writing, people lived embedded within collective, multisensory experience—speech was not simply a tool for transmitting information but a dynamic, embodied act that bound communities together. Oral cultures thrived on immediacy, presence, and cyclical notions of time. Narrative was not something consumed in solitude but performed and shared, woven into the rhythms of daily life. With the invention of writing, however, language was detached from voice, breath, and body. It was externalised, abstracted, and preserved—no longer ephemeral, but permanent, visual, and private. McLuhan argues that writing created a new kind of human: the individual. The act of reading silently, in isolation, promoted a sense of personal interiority distinct from the group. As he observes, the portability of the book helped fuel the cult of individualism, allowing people to construct identity apart from tribe, clan, or immediate social ties. This transformation was deepened by the printing press, which not only standardised language but mechanised thought. Reading became faster and more linear; the voice was quieted, and the visual sense took dominance over the auditory and tactile. What had once been a collective and multi-sensory act was now streamlined into a solitary, visual experience. This change did not come without loss. For McLuhan, the shift to writing represented a narrowing of the human sensorium. The alphabet reduced the complex interplay of sound, gesture, emotion, and social context into uniform marks on a page. Writing turned the living world into a system of signs to be decoded, rather than inhabited. Print further accelerated this process, making reading more efficient but also more detached. It made possible the rise of modern institutions—schools, bureaucracies, markets—but at the cost of immediacy and ritual. Knowledge became something stored rather than remembered, consulted rather than lived. McLuhan's view echoes ancient warnings. In 'Phaedrus', Plato predicted that writing would give only the semblance of wisdom. People would forget how to remember, mistaking the accumulation of texts for the possession of knowledge. Writing, McLuhan suggests, fulfils this prophecy. It amplifies information but weakens memory. It creates systems of education and science while simultaneously dulling the intuitive, sacred, and emotional dimensions of life. The literate person may know more but feels less. This flattening of experience is the paradox at the heart of literacy. Writing offers permanence, structure, and progress, but it also strips experience of its fullness. It turns the sacred into the secular, the communal into the individual, the dynamic into the static. In the literate world, physiological acts lose their ritual weight—they become routine rather than sacrament. The more people read, the less they embody what they know. Writing transforms not only how humans think but what they are able to feel. As McLuhan concludes, the great power of writing is its ability to reshape human consciousness. But in doing so, it reduces a world once thick with presence into a world of visual sequence—flattened, ordered, and profoundly alone.

How the human brain learnt to read

In 'Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain[133]' (2007), Maryanne Wolf explores how the invention of writing and, later, printing fundamentally transformed the human brain, reshaping not only how people think but who they are. Unlike

[133] Wolf, M. (2007) Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. New York: HarperCollins.

spoken language, which the brain acquires naturally, reading is a cultural invention that must be painstakingly learnt and physically rewires the brain's circuitry. Wolf traces how early writing systems began to train the brain to process abstract symbols visually, while the advent of the printing press amplified this transformation, accelerating the spread of literacy and fostering new forms of abstract, linear, and analytical thought. Writing externalised memory, deepened introspection, and enabled people to think across time and space, but it also introduced cognitive trade-offs—favouring visual processing over oral and embodied knowledge. In charting the brain's adaptation to reading, Wolf reveals how literacy did not just add a skill but altered the very architecture of human consciousness. 'Proust and the Squid' tells the story of how the human brain learnt to read, a journey that spans thousands of years and reshapes what it means to think. Humans were not born to read; there is no genetic blueprint for literacy. Unlike spoken language, which develops naturally, reading is an invention that requires the brain to repurpose existing neural circuits. This adaptation, while unnatural, became one of the most significant turning points in human evolution, transforming how people understand time, memory, and the world itself. Wolf traces this development from the ancient Sumerians, who used clay tablets to train young scribes, to the invention of the Greek alphabet, and onward to the complexities of the modern reading brain. Each stage in this history shows how literacy changed not only how people communicated but how they thought. Early scripts like Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs required enormous effort to master. They demanded sharp memory, pattern recognition, and visual processing. Learning to read these scripts was difficult, but it trained the brain to think in new ways. The alphabet, especially the Greek version, marked a major shift. By representing speech with a small number of letters, it reduced the burden on memory and allowed for more abstract reasoning. Wolf draws a connection between this simplified writing system and the emergence of philosophical thinking in ancient Greece. As reading became more accessible, the mind was freed to engage in deeper, more reflective thought. The phonetic alphabet fundamentally reshapes the brain's development and cognitive processes by reducing spoken language into a small, consistent set of visual symbols representing individual sounds. This simplification, seen most clearly in the Greek alphabet, allows for faster literacy acquisition and fosters abstract thinking by externalising and analysing the basic units of speech. Neurological studies reveal that readers of alphabetic scripts primarily activate regions in the left hemisphere of the brain, while readers of character-based systems like Chinese engage more distributed networks across both hemispheres. This divergence influences how language, memory, and meaning are processed. The phonetic alphabet encourages linear, sequential reasoning and supports analytical and philosophical thought by minimising the cognitive load of memorisation. Yet, as Maryanne Wolf emphasises, it is not inherently superior to other writing systems. Cultures with non-phonetic scripts have also produced rich intellectual traditions. The phonetic alphabet does not make the brain better, but it shapes it differently—emphasising abstraction, efficiency, and visual bias at the cost of sensory complexity. In this sense, the alphabet helped lay the groundwork for modern consciousness. Marcel Proust compared reading to a kind of telepathy—an act where the mind travels into another's thoughts. For Wolf, this image captures the magic of literacy: reading is not just about symbols on a page, but about entering other perspectives and ideas. The brain, when reading deeply, creates a dialogue between past and present, self, and other. This mental flexibility is one of literacy's great gifts, allowing people to imagine, reason, and empathise. But Wolf also warns that this gift is fragile. The rise of digital media brings new challenges. Unlike the sustained focus required by books, screens encourage skimming, multitasking, and distraction. Studies suggest that deep reading, which builds critical thinking and emotional insight, may be declining. The same brain that once learnt to read can now be rewired again—

this time in ways that may not support careful thought. If digital reading becomes the norm, what happens to the brain's capacity for reflection? To preserve the full power of literacy, people must continue to teach and practice deep reading. The brain's ability to change is both its strength and its vulnerability. How that flexibility is used will shape the future of reading—and of thinking itself. Maryanne Wolf explores how the invention of writing and, later, printing fundamentally transformed the human brain, reshaping not only how people think but who they are. Unlike spoken language, which the brain acquires naturally, reading is a cultural invention that must be painstakingly learnt and physically rewires the brain's circuitry. Wolf traces how early writing systems began to train the brain to process abstract symbols visually, while the advent of the printing press amplified this transformation, accelerating the spread of literacy and fostering new forms of abstract, linear, and analytical thought. Writing externalised memory, deepened introspection, and enabled people to think across time and space, but it also introduced cognitive trade-offs—favouring visual processing over oral and embodied knowledge. In charting the brain's adaptation to reading, Wolf reveals how literacy did not just add a skill but altered the very architecture of human consciousness.

Reading fiction and reading minds

A 2016 study 'Reading fiction and reading minds: The role of simulation in the default network[134] ' by Tamir, Bricker, Dodell-Feder, and Mitchell investigates how reading fiction activates specific regions of the brain associated with social cognition. Using functional neuroimaging, the researchers demonstrate that fiction engages the brain's default network, particularly areas linked to simulating other people's thoughts and feelings. Reading fiction engages the brain in ways that differ profoundly from reading non-fiction, especially through its unique ability to simulate minds, emotions, and complex social worlds. This study demonstrates that fiction reading activates the brain's 'default network', a system of interconnected regions responsible for imagining hypothetical events, past experiences, and, crucially, the thoughts and feelings of others. Unlike non-fiction, which typically presents facts, explanations, or arguments, fiction demands that readers enter the mental lives of characters, interpret motivations, and construct rich, imagined social environments. This process recruits the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) subnetwork of the default system—specifically tied to 'theory of mind' (ToM), or the ability to understand others' beliefs and intentions. When participants read social and abstract fiction passages, this dmPFC subnetwork was strongly activated. Those who read more fiction also performed better on ToM tasks, such as moral reasoning involving intent. Mediation analysis confirmed that neural activity in this subnetwork explained the link between fiction reading and social cognition, while vivid but non-social scene simulations did not. In other words, the value of fiction lies not simply in its narrative or descriptive richness, but in its unique capacity to train people to think about people. Importantly, the effects are not replicated by non-fiction. In fact, exposure to non-fiction was not associated with improved ToM and in some cases correlated with poorer social cognitive performance. This suggests that not all reading is equal. The imaginative and emotional demands of literary fiction—where readers must infer inner lives and feel alongside characters—offer a kind of practice for social understanding that non-fiction does not. Thus, fiction reading is not merely entertainment or a less serious cousin of writing; it is a vital exercise for the social mind. It builds empathy not by instruction, but by simulation. Writing creates distance, documentation,

[134] Tamir, D. I., Bricker, A. B., Dodell-Feder, D., & Mitchell, J. P. (2016). Reading fiction and reading minds: The role of simulation in the default network. Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 11(2), 215–224. https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsv114

and permanence; fiction reading creates connection, imagination, and flexible understanding. In this sense, fictional speech, writing, and reading form a separate cognitive domain from factual language use. Reading fiction is not a passive act—it is a participatory simulation that reshapes how people perceive and relate to others. Rather than being interchangeable with non-fiction, fiction demands a different kind of reader—one who imagines rather than evaluates, inhabits rather than records. The human brain appears to reward this difference: those who engage with fiction are training themselves in the art of social thought. In a world increasingly saturated with information but starved for understanding, fiction remains a critical resource not just for culture, but for cognition itself. The reading mind becomes not just informed but restructured—built to navigate imagined worlds and other minds, a cognitive architecture distinct from that shaped by non-fiction or oral traditions.

Shakespeare's 'Linguistic Internet'

'Shakespeare turns English into the world's linguistic internet a platform in which all cultures ideas and worldviews can meet and crossbreed. Shakespeare is transforming English into this extremely flexible beautiful memorable language which allows everyone to learn English well. It's a linguistic internet. For the first time all cultures are able to meet together in within a English language and communicate with each other. But this exchange is mediated through Anglo-American civilization which is at its heart utilitarian, sceptical and empirical. So when you embrace English, when you experience English you're also experiencing British culture history and philosophy'.

- Jiang Xueqin, 'Shakespeare's Language of Empire'

In a lecture[135] to his Beijing students, Jiang Xueqin coined the term 'linguistic internet'[136] to describe how Shakespeare's innovations in syntax and diction transformed English into a global platform. This network, unlike oral or literary traditions of the past, enabled the cross-pollination of cultures and ideas within an imperial frame. Shakespeare's language, deliberately mediocre in message, served not to transmit truth but to build infrastructure—a flexible, memorably musical medium ready to host the empire's values. English thus became not a message but a medium: the channel itself, designed for scalability. Its content mattered less than its capacity to carry—and absorb—others. Xueqin asked, 'How did Shakespeare father the British empire?' William Shakespeare did not set out to forge an empire. He wrote for a raucous public in the theatres of Elizabethan England—spaces filled with noise, drink, and laughter. Yet his language would become the foundation of British imperial identity. Through innovations in diction, syntax, and imagery, Shakespeare elevated English from a regional vernacular into a global medium—what Jiang Xueqin calls a 'linguistic internet'. This network allowed diverse cultures, ideologies, and peoples to communicate across vast distances, not merely exchanging words but cross-breeding worldviews, all within the linguistic framework of Anglo-American civilisation. Shakespeare's true genius lay not in political vision, but in psychological and rhetorical imagination. He did not theorise imperial power; he dramatised human frailty, ambition, and desire. His characters—Hamlet, Lear, Othello—are not allegories or types but complex individuals, each shaped by inner conflict and emotional depth. He observed people

[135] Predictive History (2025). Civilization #51: Shakespeare's Language of Empire. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qms7trnKwqQ [Accessed 5 Aug. 2025].

[136] "Linguistic internet" describes English as a cultural network, not to be confused with "Internet linguistics," a field pioneered by David Crystal.

closely, and without elite prejudice. That human insight granted his works a universal appeal, ensuring their continued relevance and adaptability across continents and centuries. His impact on the English language was unprecedented. Shakespeare coined or transformed thousands of words and expressions, stretching the bounds of syntax and metaphor. A single term like 'dagger' became, in his hands, a vehicle for new psychological meanings—suggesting suspicion, fear, or betrayal. He manipulated grammar freely, turning nouns into verbs, and adjectives into adverbs. His diction created an expansive vocabulary capable of capturing new experiences, objects, and abstract ideas arising from global exploration and imperial ambition. Moreover, his poetic form—especially the use of iambic pentameter—rendered his lines memorable and musical, making complex ideas accessible even to illiterate audiences. Phrases such as 'a sea of troubles' or 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' embedded themselves into collective memory, shaping emotional perception through rhythm and image. Shakespeare thus offered not just stories, but a way of seeing and feeling—a language that touched both the mind and the senses. Jiang Xueqin's term 'Linguistic Internet' captures this phenomenon. English, through Shakespeare, became a medium rather than a message—valuable not for its content, which could be deliberately banal or ambivalent, but for its function as a flexible framework for global communication. Shakespeare's language in 'Julius Caesar' is not about the plot, but about creating enduring typologies—models of speech, character, and action so potent they reshape perception and behaviour. Like a secular Bible, his words implant mental images that outlive their context. The story is secondary; the form becomes the message. Through rhetorical rhythm and metaphor, Shakespeare transforms language into a neurological architecture of belief. The language itself became the infrastructure of empire: scalable, portable, ideologically neutral on the surface, yet quietly encoded with British pragmatism, empiricism, and utilitarianism. Shakespeare's plays were deeply ambivalent about power. Yet his works were later deployed as evidence of British superiority, taught in colonial schools, and held up as proof of civilisation. The irony is stark: a playwright who never left England became the cultural passport of empire. Shakespeare did not build the empire. But he gave it its written language. 'The pen is the tongue of the mind', wrote Cervantes—but unlike the tongue, which speaks only to the person before it, the pen speaks to generations. It carries intention across time, reaching a non-finite number of readers long after the voice has faded.

How to Write a Language?

When Saints Cyril and Methodius developed the language now called Old Church Slavonic in the 9th century, they were not merely translating Scripture—they were inventing an entirely new way for language to function within a civilization. Their work created not just a liturgical language but a kind of 'linguistic internet'—a platform for transregional communication, cultural exchange, and imperial integration. Rather than representing a local people, tradition, or folklore, this language was deliberately detached from any specific Slavic ethnos. Its value did not lie in its content but in its architecture: scalable, flexible, and designed to carry a civilization's ideological payload. Old Church Slavonic arose in direct defiance of the so-called 'trilingual heresy', the belief that only Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were valid for praising God. At the time, this was not just a theological position—it was a cultural and political gatekeeping mechanism, limiting sacred legitimacy to the languages of existing empires. In this context, Cyril and Methodius' choice to use the vernacular of Slavic converts was revolutionary. They created not just a translation but an entirely new linguistic infrastructure—a liturgical, grammatical, and written system capable of uniting disparate Slavic dialects into one communicative network. Unlike oral traditions or elite literary canons, Old Church Slavonic was engineered as a platform. Its syntax and diction were consciously composed to be

comprehensible, replicable, and easily adaptable across Slavic-speaking regions. This made it ideal for missionary work and political expansion. It offered a musical and memorably structured medium that lacked the idiosyncrasies and irregularities of everyday speech. In doing so, it achieved what few languages before had: becoming a shared matrix of meaning among people who had no shared ethnicity, folklore, or identity. It was not a poetic or expressive tongue, but a conduit—a vessel for transmitting imperial ideology and spiritual authority. By design, the language was neutral, even mediocre. It had no allegiance to local customs or myths and carried no native emotional resonance. In this way, it functioned more like code than poetry—unemotional but highly functional. It allowed for the absorption of content from different sources without disrupting the system's structural integrity. Just as today's internet protocols enable the transmission of everything from cat videos to political propaganda, Old Church Slavonic enabled the movement of both scripture and imperial policy across borders. It was scalable before scalability had a name. In this linguistic system, language was no longer the message. Language was the medium—a framework optimized for expansion, integration, and endurance. The content it carried—prayers, creeds, laws—could change or evolve. What mattered was that it enabled cultural transmission on an imperial scale. This shift anticipates modern ideas about networks, where communication systems are judged not by what they say but by what they allow others to say. Old Church Slavonic was not merely a language born of missionary necessity. It was the prototype of a linguistic operating system. It transformed local dialects into nodes within a greater cultural grid, connecting communities that had never before shared a common vocabulary or conceptual world. It was not a voice of any one people, but a multilingual skeleton key, opening doors across the Slavic world. Cyril and Methodius, in rejecting trilingualism, did not merely argue for liturgical plurality—they redefined what language itself could be: not the carrier of one people's truth, but the platform upon which many truths could be programmed. In this way, the invention of Old Church Slavonic was less about writing 'in language' than writing 'a language'—an artificial, scalable, ideologically neutral system built not to express the past, but to host the future. Language is never unaligned; to write a language is to prefigure 'a people'. In shaping its structure, values, and voice, you do not merely describe reality—you create a world and mould its inhabitants in your own image, as gods once did.

7.2. Art of writing

(The scripted mind: Silent power of the written word)

'To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking'.

Jacques Derrida, Acts of Literature

The lost art of writing

Anne Trubek's 'The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting[137]' (2016) and Philip Hensher's 'The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting[138]' (2012) offer complementary portraits of handwriting's cultural trajectory—one viewing its decline as inevitable, the other lamenting its loss as an erosion of humanity. Trubek outlines a convincing argument that

[137] Trubek, A. (2016) The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting. New York: Bloomsbury.
[138] Hensher, P. (2012) The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting (And Why It Still Matters). London: Macmillan.

handwriting, once a cornerstone of literacy and character, is now rapidly becoming obsolete. She charts its historical path from ancient cuneiform and hieroglyphics through Roman capitals and medieval scripts to the American penmanship drills of the 19th and 20th centuries, where good handwriting was a moral virtue, tied to discipline and industriousness. But Trubek argues this kind of hand no longer serves its social function. Typing, texting, scanning, and voice commands have made the pen a relic. The skill of writing by hand has receded to the margins of education and culture, used more for sentimental value than necessity. Hensher, on the other hand, resists the obituary. In 'The Missing Ink', he illustrates—sometimes literally—why handwriting still matters. His tone is anecdotal, scattered, and witty, but beneath it lies a serious question: what do we lose when we stop writing by hand? Hensher's answer is clear—handwriting is not just a tool for communication but an extension of personality, memory, and presence. He recounts the value of leaving handwritten notes, lists, corrections, and condolences—things digital writing struggles to replicate with the same intimacy or emotional texture. A typed condolence letter, for example, may appear impersonal or even offensive in moments of grief. Hensher's example of Gordon Brown's controversial handwritten letter to a bereaved parent, imperfect spelling and all, underscores the point: sometimes only handwriting will do. Together, the two authors show that what we often call 'written language' today is typographic language. When most people write, they mean typing—on laptops, tablets, or phones—or increasingly, speaking to digital assistants. The shift from handwriting to typography, and now to digital input, has profound implications not just for literacy but for cognition and culture. Trubek demonstrates that modern life no longer requires a handwritten script for practical purposes, but Hensher insists that the script preserves a kind of authenticity that printed and digital forms cannot replicate. What is striking in both books is the recognition that handwriting is not static. Scripts evolve. Hensher's survey of historical styles, from copperplate and Sütterlin to Marion Richardson's child-friendly script, shows that handwriting has always been shaped by ideology, pedagogy, and aesthetics. Even the notion that handwriting reflects moral character—once widely accepted—is now treated with scepticism, both in Trubek's critique of graphology and in Hensher's humorous mock-beliefs. Yet both authors note that the physical act of writing, especially by hand, affects how people think. Whether it is scrawling thoughts in the margins of a book or sketching out a speech on a scrap of paper, handwriting supports reflection, improvisation, and memory in ways that typing may not. Digital writing, while efficient and versatile, tends to strip language of materiality—reducing letters to pixels, flattening identity to font. In the long arc of history, handwriting was never a mass phenomenon. For most of its existence, it belonged to the few—to scribes, monks, clerks, and artists—not the many. Even as literacy spread, handwriting remained more an art than a utility, closer in spirit to calligraphy, painting, and ornament than to the rapid-fire efficiency of modern communication. Its golden age as a widespread practice was brief and anomalous, a flicker between the labour of scribes and the automation of print and pixels. Handwriting was less a technology of mass messaging than a personal gesture, an expressive trace of the hand behind the thought. In the age of digital immediacy, its decline is not surprising—but the loss is still cultural, intimate, and deeply human.

Zen in the art of writing

In 'Zen in the Art of Writing[139]', Ray Bradbury reflects on the deep relationship between writing and living. For him, writing is not just a craft but a way to survive the chaos of the world. It is how he keeps himself grounded, connected, and alive. He describes writing as

[139] Bradbury, R. (1990) Zen in the Art of Writing. Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions.

something necessary—an act he must do every day to keep from falling apart. Skipping even a single day leaves him uneasy, as if he is losing touch with himself and the world. But when he writes, even briefly, he feels restored. Bradbury's early experience as a nine-year-old boy helped shape this philosophy. After being mocked for his love of comic books, he abandoned them, only to return a month later out of love for Buck Rogers. This moment of self-rebellion marked the beginning of a lifelong lesson: that writing and passion are inseparable. That child's defiance, the refusal to surrender what he loved, became the foundation of his creative life. It was a small but defining act of survival. He argues that writing helps process the emotional burdens of life—loss, fear, tragedy. While writing may not erase suffering, it gives shape to pain and offers a way through it. He speaks of friends and family affected by illness, grief, and hardship. Writing, in these moments, becomes a kind of resistance. It does not solve life's problems, but it helps one endure them. In Bradbury's view, writing is both an act of memory and defiance—a way to keep moving forward despite the wounds. What drives great writing, according to Bradbury, is not technique or theory but passion. He uses words like 'zest' and 'gusto' to describe the emotional fuel behind good storytelling. Writers should not write to impress or follow trends. Instead, they should write from love or anger, from joy or frustration. He points to writers and artists like Dickens, Melville, and Mozart—creators whose work was filled with energy and feeling. That is what makes it last. For Bradbury, writing must come from emotional truth. Whether the subject is a trolley ride or a pair of tennis shoes, the writer's connection to the material is what gives it power. He once drafted a short story out of anger after seeing a magazine exploit Puerto Rican people in a photo shoot. That rage turned into a narrative, and the story connected with readers. It was born not from strategy but from urgency. He urges writers to forget about success, forget about the market, and just write. The process itself is the reward. To write honestly and regularly is to train, to become fluent in one's own voice. He compares this to a kind of athletic practice, where repetition builds strength and confidence. Writing, like life, is about showing up again, no matter the odds.

Writing down your soul

In 'Writing Down Your Soul[140]', Janet Conner explores how writing can become a path to deep inner connection. She argues that while prayer, meditation, or even talking with others can offer insight, writing holds a special kind of power. It does not just help organise thoughts—it creates a space where the conscious and unconscious mind meet. Writing becomes a dialogue between parts of the self that are often kept separate in daily life. What makes this form of writing so different is its honesty. It is not about grammar or form. It is about showing up on the page, unfiltered. When people write freely—without censoring or editing—they access something more raw and real. Conner describes this as tapping into the voice beneath the surface, the voice that knows what is really going on. That voice often holds pain, but also truth and clarity. Writing becomes a mirror that does not lie. This process also has measurable health benefits. Conner cites psychologist James Pennebaker, who found that expressive writing, especially about trauma or emotion, can lead to better immune function, reduced blood pressure, and improved mental clarity. In his studies, people who wrote about their feelings for just 15 minutes a day experienced long-term improvements in well-being. Some even saw positive changes in their careers and relationships. This suggests that writing can act as both therapy and transformation. On a neurological level, writing seems to help the brain balance emotion and reason. Candace Pert's research in neuroscience revealed that emotions live in every cell of the body, carried by chemical messengers called peptides. When emotions are blocked—by denial,

[140] Conner, J. (2008) Writing Down Your Soul. San Francisco: Conari Press.

repression, or silence—those messengers get stuck. This can lead to feeling disconnected, depressed, or even ill. Writing releases that blockage. It opens the channel. Words become movement. The act of writing lets the truth flow. Writing can also shift the brain's activity. As emotional memories rise to the surface, the logical mind is still at work shaping sentences and following thought patterns. This creates what researchers call brain-wave coherence. The brain begins to integrate emotion and logic. That is when new understanding can happen. People might find unexpected connections, see patterns in their behaviour, or come to peace with something that had once haunted them. Conner believes that when you write in this open, fearless way, you are not alone. You connect with something larger—some call it God, others call it spirit, or higher self. The name does not matter. What matters is the experience of being heard. The page listens. And in that act of listening, healing begins. Over time, writing becomes more than a tool. It becomes a companion. Writing this way is not about creating art. It is about being real. It is about finding a way through pain or confusion to some place of peace. When people give themselves permission to write with honesty, they often find answers they did not know they had. They begin to trust their inner voice.

Reader come home

In 'Reader Come Home[141]', Maryanne Wolf explores the changing nature of reading and how it reshapes the human brain. Unlike speech, reading is not hardwired into our biology. It is a cultural invention, and every brain that learns to read must reconfigure itself to do so. This transformation has been central to how humans think, reflect, and connect with others. But today, as more reading shifts from page to screen, we face a new moment of transition—one that raises urgent questions about attention, depth, and the future of literacy. Wolf argues that the shift from print to digital media is not just a matter of format. It changes the way we read, the speed of our engagement, and the circuits our brains develop. Digital reading, especially when done quickly across devices, favours scanning, clicking, and moving on. In contrast, reading in print encourages sustained attention, inference, and empathy. As digital habits become dominant, the kind of deep reading that fosters critical thinking may become harder to sustain. This is not only about adults. Children growing up in digital environments are learning to read in ways quite different from previous generations. Their brains are adapting to speed, distraction, and fragmented attention. This affects not just what they read but how they think. Wolf worries that the neural pathways once strengthened through deep reading—those that support reflection, memory, and emotional insight—may be weakening in this new environment. If we understand how different reading mediums affect the brain, we can make informed choices. Her hope is to cultivate what she calls a 'biliterate brain'—a mind that can move between screen and page, speed, and depth, without losing the cognitive and emotional richness of traditional reading. She draws on neuroscience, education, and literature to show how reading works in the brain. When we read deeply, multiple brain regions work in harmony: visual areas recognise letters; language centres decode and interpret; memory and emotion shape meaning. This complex system allows for a kind of inner dialogue that connects us with others and ourselves. But it must be exercised. Without practice, the brain's deep-reading circuits can weaken, just like muscles that go unused. Wolf also draws attention to a growing cultural impatience with long-form reading. The rise of the phrase 'too long; didn't read' reflects more than a joke—it signals a shift in how people value time, focus, and comprehension. In a world flooded with information, we risk trading understanding for efficiency. Her message is both a warning and an invitation. Deep reading is not just a habit—it is a way of being in the

[141] Wolf, M. (2018) Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World. New York: Harper.

world. It shapes how we reason, empathise, and imagine. Deep reading strengthens attention, fosters empathy, and builds critical thought. But these are not automatic outcomes—they require time, practice, and stillness. In a world increasingly driven by speed and distraction, this kind of reading is at risk.

Therapeutic potential of writing

Writing is not simply about telling stories or perfecting grammar. It can be a powerful means of personal discovery and emotional healing. In her book 'The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing[142]', Gillie Bolton argues that writing allows people to explore difficult emotions in a safe and private space, offering an alternative to spoken therapy and a chance to confront what might otherwise remain unspoken. Writing for oneself, not for publication or praise, becomes a space of freedom where fears, memories, and hopes can emerge without judgment or interruption. It gives form to confusion and helps people see their experiences from new angles, often bringing relief or understanding that talking alone cannot offer. Unlike everyday conversation, writing stays. It does not vanish into the air. It can be returned to, revised, or even discarded. This permanence lets people revisit thoughts when they are ready. Writing slows things down. It helps shape feelings into something manageable. When someone writes honestly, without fear of being corrected or misunderstood, they create a space in which they can reflect and heal. For many, it becomes a companion—a way to track change, notice patterns, and express what is too tangled to say aloud. There is no need to be a 'good' writer to benefit. The value of therapeutic writing lies in its honesty, not its literary merit. Spelling, structure, and form do not matter. What matters is expression. Whether it takes the form of poetry, personal narrative, letters, or even fiction, writing allows people to approach their emotions from different angles. Some may invent characters to explore parts of themselves they cannot yet face directly. Others may write to loved ones—alive or dead—saying what could never be spoken. Research supports the idea that writing can promote healing. Studies show that people who write about traumatic experiences tend to experience improved immune function and fewer visits to the doctor. The process of creating a narrative helps integrate fragmented emotions. Bolton notes that writing allows one to slow down and listen, both to the self and to the past. It invites clarity, not by forcing a conclusion but by making space for complexity. Writing can also act like a mirror, but one that does not simply reflect—it transforms. By putting feelings into language, people begin to reshape their experience. In this sense, writing becomes a form of self-creation. It opens the door to multiple selves, each with their own voice, allowing the writer to understand their inner contradictions without fear of breaking apart. Creative writing, then, is not separate from therapeutic writing. Many writers draw on personal pain to create fiction or poetry. But even for those with no literary ambition, writing offers value. It lets the inner voice speak, not to impress others, but to make sense of life. As Bolton writes, 'you cannot write the wrong thing'. The words, once written, begin to work on the writer themselves. Creative writing holds the power to heal not because it solves problems, but because it allows one to face them with care and attention. Writing can soothe, clarify, provoke, and transform. It is not just expression—it is listening, witnessing, and sometimes forgiving. As a practice of self-care and self-knowledge, it is always available, always personal, and often life changing. Bolton concludes that creative writing is not merely self-expression but a transformative act of self-creation, where the writer both uncovers and constructs the self through the process of writing.

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[142] Bolton, G. (1999) The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Writing and difference

In his essay 'Freud and the Scene of Writing[143]', Jacques Derrida explores the deep ties between psychoanalysis and writing. His aim is not to psychoanalyse philosophy but to examine how Western thought has repressed writing in favour of speech, tracing this tendency back to Plato. He draws on Freud's theories to suggest that writing has not simply been excluded but internalised as a mechanism that philosophy both relies on and attempts to deny. Writing, for Derrida, becomes a kind of ghost that haunts Western metaphysics, disturbing its claims to presence, truth, and unity. Derrida sees Freud's concept of repression as central. Repression, as Freud described it, does not push ideas away entirely. Instead, it keeps them within the system, hidden yet active. Derrida uses this idea to describe how writing operates in the unconscious. It is not outside language but is built into its structure. Speech appears dominant, but writing shows the fractures and gaps that speech tries to cover. The unconscious does not speak; it writes. And this writing is not a stable record. It is made of traces—marks that indicate what has passed but can never fully return. He points to Freud's metaphor of the Mystic Writing Pad as an example of how memory works like writing. This children's toy, made of wax and a removable plastic sheet, allows impressions to be made and erased. Freud used it to explain how the mind retains traces of experience. Derrida argues that this metaphor shows how memory and perception depend on spacing, erasure, and repetition—not presence. The psyche, like the pad, cannot hold on to everything. It writes, erases, rewrites. This is not a flaw, but the very condition of remembering. The same structure shapes dreams. Freud compared dreams to cryptographic writing, a kind of secret script that must be interpreted. Derrida sees this as further proof that the unconscious is not ruled by speech but by a logic of inscription. Writing, in this sense, becomes the model for psychic life. Even Freud's earliest work, such as the 'Project for a Scientific Psychology', relied on metaphors of paths, breaches, and barriers—images of writing before Freud named it as such. For Derrida, the idea of the trace is central. A trace is not simply a sign of something that once was. It is also the mark of what can never be fully known. It is the effect of difference, of something always delayed, always deferred. Freud's concept of 'Nachträglichkeit', or deferred action, supports this: memory is not a return to the past but a re-inscription of meaning in the present. The past is never fully present; it is shaped by what comes after. Writing makes this delay visible. It is not just a tool of language but a structure of time and subjectivity. In the end, Derrida argues that Freud's work, though still caught in some metaphysical assumptions, begins to undo them. Freud's metaphors, his reliance on writing, his notion of repetition and repression, all point to a deeper truth: that writing is not secondary to thought but its very condition. Writing is what allows thought to happen. It is the space where meaning breaks and is remade. Writing, then, is not just a record. It is an event. It is the trace of something that both is and is not. It shapes memory, identity, and time itself. And in this play of presence and absence, life and death, writing opens the space for thinking anew.

How to write a sentence

Stanley Fish begins 'How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One[144]' with a simple truth: if you want to write well, you must love sentences. Writing is not about ideas floating in the air or grand inspiration. It begins with a close attention to structure, to form, to how language works one sentence at a time. A sentence is not just a string of words. It is a shaped event, a thought given body. Fish insists that the sentence is the basic unit of composition and comprehension. Without understanding what makes a sentence work, one cannot learn how to

[143] Derrida, J. (1978) Writing and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[144] Fish, S. (2011) How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One. New York: HarperCollins.

think clearly, much less write clearly. Fish compares writing to painting. Painters do not begin with visions of masterpieces. They begin with paint. They explore what colour and texture can do. Writers begin with sentences. Not words alone—words only become meaningful when shaped by syntax. As Anthony Burgess once noted, syntax allows words to come alive. Syntax gives them direction, role, and force. Words become actions, subjects, feelings. Without syntax, they remain scattered parts. The sentence, then, is the tool that binds language into thought. Great writers, Fish shows, obsess over sentences. Flaubert paced his room, shouting out versions of a line until he found the one that captured the mood, the rhythm, the thought. He was not searching for the perfect word, but for a structure in which the words held each other tightly. Virginia Tufte's work, cited by Fish, explains how meaning arises not from words alone but from their relationship. A sentence, properly made, generates thought. It organises perception. A great sentence is not just a delivery system—it is an act of creation. Fish delights in sentences that strike with precision. He collects them. A single line from a movie or a court ruling can be a work of art. Justice Scalia, writing in dissent, once quipped, 'Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs'. The power of that line is not in its legal argument but in its pacing, structure, and rhythm. It lands like a blow because of how it is written. It is efficient and sharp. Even a child can stumble upon a great sentence by instinct, placing just enough tension or ambiguity to pull a reader forward. The study of great sentences, for Fish, is not just for pleasure. It is the best way to learn how to write. Roland Barthes once said, 'There is nothing in discourse that is not to be found in a sentence'. The logic of a paragraph, an argument, or an entire book is present in a single well-crafted line. Hugh Kenner once advised a writer: if you can get the first sentence right, the rest will follow. This is because the first sentence contains the tone, rhythm, and logic of the whole piece. Writing a sentence is an act of design. Reading one is an act of discovery. The more one studies sentences, the more one sees their inner mechanics. And the more one imitates them, the closer one comes to mastering them. Writing well, then, is a matter of reading with care, noticing form, and practicing structure repeatedly.

The sentence as a world

Stanley Fish's 'How to Write a Sentence' treats the sentence not as a neutral tool but as a world unto itself. A sentence is not simply a vehicle for meaning. It is meaning, form, rhythm, argument, and architecture all at once. Before ideas can be communicated, they must be shaped. Sentences provide this shape. They do not merely report the world—they make it legible. Form comes first, Fish argues, because it is form that allows content to appear at all. Writing begins not with inspiration but with attention to structure. Syntax, for Fish, is where thought takes place. Sentences align actors, actions, and objects into coherent movement. Styles emerge from these arrangements. Some writers prefer the subordinating style, in which clauses nest within clauses to build logical force. Others write additively, allowing ideas to spill out, each thought tumbling into the next. And then there is the satiric style, where syntax becomes a tool of irony or critique, pulling apart what it also constructs. These styles are not arbitrary—they guide how one thinks and feels through language. The sentence does more than carry meaning. It performs. It opens and closes, advances and delays. First sentences establish a horizon; last ones deliver judgment, closure, or collapse. Fish points out that some sentences are so perfectly crafted, they seem to know they are being read. Philip Sidney's line from 'An Apology for Poetry' does not just talk about heroic action—it throws the reader into it, racing through the syntax before reflecting on what has just occurred. Milton, meanwhile, insists that writing well requires living well. His sentence from 'Apology' stretches beyond description. One must become the poem, not merely write it. Francis Bacon's famous sentence—'What is Truth? said jesting Pilate and

would not stay for an answer'—withholds resolution. It exposes the blindness of its subject while denying the reader satisfaction. The sentence performs its own avoidance. Similarly, John Donne, grappling with the divine, builds a sentence that cannot hold still. It opens with confidence, then disintegrates into metaphor, unable to contain what it seeks to name. Language fractures under the weight of its subject, and the sentence becomes a confession of its limits. Fish shows how writers like Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford use sentences to reveal, not just describe. Conrad insists meaning lies not at the centre of the tale but in its edges. Sentences must circle, echo, and haunt. Ford's narrator in 'The Good Soldier' cannot make sense of his story, but the sentences betray more than he knows. Meaning seeps out not from comprehension but from arrangement, from the rhythm of the telling. Some writers use sentences to mirror time. Anthony Powell choreographs language to echo memory's pulse. Bunyan's sentence about Christian leaving home enacts inner conflict in syntax. The form does not just tell us something—it makes us feel it. Fish's message is clear. Sentences are not passive. They are dynamic, alive with tension, contradiction, and revelation. Each one is a crafted moment where thought meets form.

The art of dramatic writing

Lajos Egri's 'The Art of Dramatic Writing[145]' begins with a haunting tale: a man destroys sacred statues in ancient Greece, not from hatred but from a desperate desire to be remembered. When caught, he calmly explains that being forgotten is worse than death. He would rather die than go unnoticed. This story is not about madness, but motive. Egri uses it to show how powerful the need for significance truly is. It is one of the central human forces, and it drives much of what people do—whether they build, destroy, love, or lie. For Egri, all dramatic writing must begin with motive. Characters are not just people on stage or paper; they are driven by forces, needs, and desires. Without understanding what drives a character, a writer cannot create meaningful drama. Motive gives birth to conflict, and conflict is the heart of every story. But not just any conflict will do. The struggle must be rooted in who the characters are, not just what they want. Characters must evolve. Drama happens when inner traits clash with outer circumstances, forcing transformation. Egri argues that every good play begins with a premise. This premise is not just a theme or message. It is a dynamic statement about life, one that the writer believes and sets out to prove. For example, 'Blind ambition leads to destruction'. The play will then demonstrate this idea, not by stating it, but by letting it unfold through action. The premise shapes the entire structure. It defines character, conflict, and conclusion. Without it, the story drifts. Many playwrights, Egri suggests, rely on talent or instinct. But even the most gifted writers can fail without a firm grasp of structure. Like architecture or music, drama follows certain principles. These are not rigid formulas, but guides rooted in the laws of cause and effect. Conflict grows from character. Resolution grows from conflict. The whole play is a movement toward proving the premise through human behaviour under pressure. Egri challenges the old debate: is plot more important than character, or vice versa? He argues that it is the wrong question. Character and plot are inseparable. A weak character cannot sustain a strong plot. A good plot cannot exist without rich, complex characters. The structure of a play must grow organically from its characters' needs and choices. Everything must serve the premise. This principle applies not only to classical tragedies but also to modern dramas, comedies, and even thrillers. A crime story, for instance, should not just be about a murder, but about the human reasons behind it. Greed, fear, pride—these are the forces that drive action, and they must be made visible through the structure of the play. Writing, for Egri, is not a matter

[145] Egri, L. (1946) The Art of Dramatic Writing. New York: Simon & Schuster.

of waiting for inspiration. It is a craft built on insight into human nature. Once a writer understands motive, premise, and structure, the tools are in place. What remains is the labour of shaping the idea into a living, breathing drama.

Driving force behind playwriting

In 'The Art of Dramatic Writing', Lajos Egri insists that a great play begins not with plot or style but with character and premise. These are the invisible forces that give a story structure, movement, and meaning. A playwright's success depends on understanding human nature and building a story from that foundation. Without this, even the most stylish writing can collapse. Egri challenges the long-standing debate between those who prioritise plot and those who emphasise character. He argues that this is a false opposition. The two are inseparable. Plot is what a character does, shaped by their desires, fears, and contradictions. If a character is not well-constructed, no amount of clever plotting can compensate. Drama happens when a character must act under pressure, and that pressure reveals who they are. Every play must have a premise, not just a theme or idea, but a statement about life that the play sets out to prove. This is the spine that holds everything together. Egri gives examples like 'Blind ambition leads to destruction' or 'Frugality leads to waste'. A good premise contains a clear cause and effect: a character trait, a conflict, and a consequence. It is not just a moral, but a pattern of human behaviour that the play explores and confirms through action. Without a premise, a play becomes a collection of disconnected scenes. The audience may be entertained, but the story lacks depth and direction. With a premise, every element—character, dialogue, plot—serves a unified purpose. The writer knows where the story is going and why it matters. This gives the play coherence and emotional impact. Egri warns against relying on inspiration or instinct alone. Even talented writers fail when they lack structure. Drama, like architecture or music, has principles. These are not rigid rules, but natural laws based on how people think, act, and change. A strong play shows a character transformed through conflict. This transformation must follow logically from the character's traits and choices, not be imposed from outside. Dialogue, too, must grow from character. It should reflect a person's background, motives, and situation. Clever lines mean nothing if they do not belong to the speaker. A mechanic does not speak like a poet. Forced elegance or wit breaks the illusion of reality and weakens the drama. The best dialogue reveals, advances, and prepares. It serves the story, not the writer's ego. A playwright does not need to preach. The message should be embedded in the characters and their journey. The audience will understand the premise if it is woven into the fabric of the play, not shouted at them. Great drama persuades not by argument but by showing. In the end, Egri's book is not a formula, but a method. He encourages writers to observe life, understand motive, and construct plays around human truth. A play should not be a display of cleverness, but a living structure, shaped by character and driven by a premise that reveals something real about the world.

Psychology of creative writing

In 'The Psychology of Creative Writing[146]', edited by Scott Barry Kaufman, Daniel Nettle explores the evolutionary roots of why people write fiction and why others are drawn to read it. Although writing itself is a cultural invention, the impulse behind storytelling, Nettle argues, comes from much older biological traits. Humans evolved as highly social beings. Living in groups demanded that early people track emotions, alliances, and intentions. The need to

[146] Nettle, D. (2009) 'The Evolution of Creative Writing', in Kaufman, S. B. and Libby, J. (eds) The Psychology of Creative Writing. New York: Cambridge University Press.

understand others gave rise to a cognitive toolset that includes language, theory of mind, and the ability to simulate imaginary scenarios. Fictional storytelling emerged as a natural extension of these traits. Storytelling allows humans to explore social dynamics in a safe, low-risk environment. Through characters, plotlines, and imagined consequences, people rehearse emotional experiences and social decisions. Reading or writing fiction strengthens empathy and sharpens social understanding. Nettle suggests that these benefits may explain why people spend so much time engaging with stories that have no direct survival function. Literature often revolves around themes like love, betrayal, rivalry, and kinship—scenarios with high evolutionary relevance. Creative writing is not just a personal hobby; it has historically been a way to gain social attention and prestige. Skilled storytellers once held respected positions in tribes and courts. Even today, successful authors and artists often enjoy admiration and influence. Geoffrey Miller's theory on sexual selection extends this idea, proposing that creativity signals intelligence and emotional depth—traits that can attract mates. Research supports this: people who excel in the arts often report more short-term romantic success. However, writing comes at a cost. It demands time, solitude, and psychological stamina. Few writers reach fame or financial security. Evolutionary models predict that in domains involving social display, success is unevenly distributed. Many compete, but only a few gain recognition. For someone to invest in creative writing, they likely possess traits such as high intelligence, imagination, and introspective depth. There is also a psychological toll. Creative writers tend to score high on openness, which helps them see connections others might miss. But this trait is linked to vulnerability, including susceptibility to mood disorders, hallucinations, and anxiety. Neuroticism—a tendency toward worries and emotional intensity—is also common among writers. These traits may fuel the creative process, providing emotional depth and observational sensitivity, but they can also lead to suffering. For some, writing may be both an outlet and a source of psychological strain. Nettle concludes that fiction persists not despite its costs, but because it aligns with deep human needs. It enables people to make sense of themselves and others. It can bind communities or elevate individuals. Whether read or written, stories fulfill essential functions—refining social cognition, offering emotional catharsis, and allowing individuals to broadcast their inner lives. The evolutionary lens does not reduce storytelling to biology but adds another layer to why it matters so much.

7.3. How to avoid speaking?

(Against speech: The ethics of the unsayable)

'The unsayable is not nothing—it is a shaping absence'.

Geoffrey H. Hartman, Saving the Text

How to avoid speaking?

In the lecture titled 'How to Avoid Speaking[147]', Derrida engages with the long tradition of negative theology to explore how language responds to what it cannot express. From the outset, he notes a peculiar obligation: to speak about that which resists speech. This tension between articulation and silence precedes the act of speaking. It is a demand embedded in the

[147] Derrida, J. (1989) 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in Budick, S. and Iser, W. (eds) Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

structure of thought itself. Negative theology is not one fixed doctrine but a diverse tradition. It stretches from the Neoplatonists to mystics like Meister Eckhart and continues into modern philosophical reflection. What unites these approaches is a shared scepticism about language's capacity to describe the divine. The divine is not simply another object among others, but something beyond being—what Dionysius the Areopagite called 'hyperousios'. As such, all predicative statements fall short. The only language deemed appropriate is one that negates itself: not this, nor that, nor anything at all. This apophatic practice, based on denial, is not simply rhetorical. It questions the foundations of meaning itself. Unlike ordinary negation, it refuses to be resolved. The denial becomes infinite. Yet this refusal is not nihilism. On the contrary, it opens space for a kind of affirmation—a movement that points beyond language without pretending to arrive anywhere conclusive. The critique of negative theology often accuses it of evasion, vagueness, or mysticism. But Derrida argues that this misses the point. Apophatic discourse is not about concealment for its own sake. It is about the limits of conceptual language and about gestures like prayer or invocation that do not fit within the frame of propositional speech. These gestures expose how language is always touched by absence, always marked by what it cannot contain. At the heart of this lies a paradox: in trying to name the unsayable, one inadvertently creates a theological structure. Every negation implies a transcendence. Thus, far from dissolving the divine, negative theology seems to produce it. Even atheism, Derrida suggests, may be the ultimate form of negative theology. To deny God through infinite negation is to affirm the necessity of the name 'God' as the placeholder for what escapes thought. This leads to the central distinction between negative theology and deconstruction. Negative theology aims toward a final silence, a union with the ineffable. Deconstruction does not. It remains in the flux of language, naming what escapes naming through terms like 'différance' or 'trace'. These terms do not point to a hidden presence. They indicate instability itself, the endless play that resists closure. Wittgenstein's line from the 'Tractatus'—'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'—becomes a turning point. Derrida does not read this as a prescription for silence, but as a transformation of silence into a speech act. Silence, too, speaks. It becomes part of discourse. One cannot truly avoid speaking. Even secrecy implies communication. Negative theology has often been linked to secrecy, but Derrida turns this around. Deconstruction does not protect hidden truths. It reveals the structure by which truths become uncertain, unstable. Language never closes in on itself. Meaning always slips. Silence, far from pure, is haunted by the return of speech.

Languages of the unsayable

In 'Languages of the Unsayable[148]', editors Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser explore how literature and theory engage with what cannot be fully expressed. They focus on the role of negativity—not as a denial, but as a space where meaning resists closure and language meets its limits. Rather than trying to recover lost content or fill gaps, this approach investigates how silence and absence actively shape the experience of reading and interpretation. Negativity here is not simple negation. It does not just oppose what is said, it operates in a more fluid way, undoing meaning while enabling its possibility. It does not resolve into synthesis, as in dialectical reasoning, but keeps meaning in motion. It opens space. It signals what lies just beyond expression—what presses at the edge of language but cannot be brought fully into speech. This kind of negativity is a force, not a void. It marks the tension between what is said and what resists being said. Wittgenstein's remark, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must

[148] Budick, S. and Iser, W. (eds) (1989) Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

be silent', is often seen as a limit. But Budick and Iser treat it as a challenge: not to stop at the unsayable, but to attend to how silence shapes what can be said. Silence is not the absence of meaning. It is the ground against which meaning appears, a condition for thought. This approach invites a reading practice that listens for gaps, pauses, and gestures that point beyond language. Negativity takes different forms. It is seen in tropes like apostrophe, which turns speech away from presence, calling out to the absent or unreachable. It is seen in the Platonic notion of 'khora', a space that receives without shaping. Negative theology, too, insists on speaking of the divine only through what it is not. These are not failed efforts at communication but different ways of articulating the inarticulable. In literature, these strategies appear across authors and styles. Paul Celan's poetry is fragmented and indirect, resisting stable meaning yet opening deep emotional resonance. Samuel Beckett's work turns language against itself, emptying it of content while continuing to speak. For both, the interruption becomes part of the utterance. Art, as Heidegger suggests, both discloses and conceals—it never just shows but always hides something in the showing. Negativity also becomes political. In the film 'Gaslight', for example, the heroine's silence is imposed, her perception discredited. Her eventual resistance is not loud but deliberate. Her return to voice dramatises how unsayability can be contested through acts of refusal and self-assertion. Here, negativity is not just abstract but embodied, woven into power and agency. Ultimately, the unsayable is not a problem to be solved. It is an element of language that reminds us of its limits. To engage with negativity is to recognise how language shapes, excludes, and gestures beyond itself. It is to listen carefully for meaning as it flickers, withdraws, and resurfaces in new forms.

Aesthetic negativity

In 'Aesthetic Theory[149]', Theodor W. Adorno offers a complex and often ambivalent account of negativity in art. Though commonly labelled a thinker of 'negative aesthetics', Adorno's approach avoids simple oppositions. Negativity appears in many forms: as critique of bourgeois culture, as formal resistance to conventional beauty, and even as a refusal of metaphysical claims. Yet his theory remains difficult to pin down, as negativity never becomes a stable category. It is a method, a structure, and a stance—but never simply one thing. For Adorno, art holds a privileged place in society precisely because of its refusal to conform. In a world shaped by exchange and instrumental reason, art becomes a space of non-identity. It resists being reduced to use, and in doing so, criticises the logic of commodification. Even when art appears decorative or useless, it still challenges the dominant system by existing outside its terms. This is the political dimension of negativity: protest through form, not propaganda. Adorno criticises works that uncritically affirm the social order. He refers to this as 'vile affirmation'. Art that simply mirrors its world without rupture or tension serves domination. Yet he also complicates this critique. Not all tradition is to be rejected. Older works can still carry negative force, especially when viewed from a world they no longer fit. The history of art, for Adorno, is dialectical—each new form negates its predecessor but also preserves it. Even modernist works, though radical, depend on what they refuse. This dialectical tension defines Adorno's notion of aesthetic form. Form is not a container for content; it is where contradictions are made visible. The structure of a work—its internal tensions, its resistance to easy harmony—becomes the space where meaning arises. Art does not imitate the world but dramatises its fractures. Even tightly composed pieces, like twelve-tone music, succeed not by unity but through dissonance. Negation, here, is a generative principle. However, Adorno warns

[149] Adorno, T. W. (1970) Aesthetic Theory. Edited by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann. Translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. London: Bloomsbury.

against mistaking negation for nihilism. He is suspicious of art that rejects meaning entirely. In his view, the absence of meaning must still mean something. Works like Beckett's do not offer content in the usual sense, but their emptiness is itself expressive. They mark the impossibility of reconciliation. Yet Adorno also worries that this gesture can become empty repetition, a pose that mimics critique without depth. Adorno's aesthetics mirrors his larger philosophy. As in 'Negative Dialectics', he seeks not to dismantle thought but to push it beyond its limits. He does not call for silence but for forms that speak from the cracks in discourse. Still, his reliance on dialectics creates a limit. Negation always implies what it negates. The pure refusal he hopes for remains haunted by traces of affirmation. In the end, Adorno's vision of art is one of damaged hope. Art promises transcendence but cannot deliver it. Its strength lies in refusal, in its failure to resolve. This makes it true—not because it reveals reality, but because it reveals its breakdown.

Writing for mental clarity

Writing has long been used to process grief and trauma, but its value extends far beyond therapy. In 'Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain[150]' James Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth have shown that writing can clarify thoughts, support learning, and help people make sense of complex experiences. It is not just a reaction to pain but a proactive method for maintaining mental well-being and organising thought. People tend to enjoy writing expressively, even in everyday situations, because it offers a way to reflect, explore, and understand. Writing does not need an audience. Whether done privately in a journal, typed on a computer, or spoken aloud, the simple act of turning feelings and thoughts into words has been shown to produce both psychological and physical benefits. When people describe emotionally significant events, they begin to shape and organise them. What was once a chaotic memory becoming part of a narrative. This kind of writing is not limited to personal matters. It can be just as useful for understanding a historical event or navigating a major life change. In educational contexts, writing enhances learning. Traditional teaching often overwhelms students with facts. Like trauma, these experiences can be intense and difficult to process. Pennebaker and Smyth note that when students are invited to write about their personal reactions to academic content, the material becomes more relatable. In one experiment, writing for just ten minutes before class helped students connect with the subject matter. Discussions became livelier, and test scores improved. Writing encouraged them to personalise abstract ideas, making learning stick. Writing also strengthens memory and cognitive function. Studies show that people who write about difficult events perform better on problem-solving tasks. This benefit is not limited to trauma. Even writing about positive life changes, such as moving to a new city or starting a job, can ease the transition and improve adaptation. Medical students who engaged in reflective writing reported fewer symptoms of depression and needed fewer health visits. For children, the link between writing and thinking starts early. Lev Vygotsky believed that writing was an extension of speech and problem-solving. Before learning formal grammar, children use scribbles and symbols to express themselves. Vygotsky suggested that writing should first be taught as a way of communicating, not just a technical skill. This approach laid the groundwork for modern writing programs that value self-expression alongside structure. For adults, freewriting can unlock creativity. Writing without concern for grammar or audience often helps people overcome blocks and think in new ways. It can also help solve problems. By writing about a challenge, identifying barriers, and

[150] Pennebaker, J. and Smyth, J. (2016) Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain. New York: Guilford Press.

reflecting on possible solutions, individuals often come to new insights, even if not immediately. In short, writing offers more than communication. It brings order to experience, opens space for thought, and fosters resilience. Used intentionally, it becomes a tool not only for expression but for personal clarity and growth.

Life-Changing Narratives

In 'Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told[151]', Jeffrey Kottler explores how stories shape not only the way people understand their lives but also how they change. Stories are not just ways to describe experience—they are the frameworks through which people interpret their past, form identities, and imagine futures. In therapy, this function becomes even more visible. A person enters the therapeutic space carrying a narrative, often one of loss, guilt, or confusion. The therapist listens and helps reshape that narrative into one of possibility or understanding. This process, what Kottler calls 'restorying', allows people to see their lives differently—to stop being stuck characters and begin becoming authors again. But storytelling is not just for therapy. It is a part of everyday life. People tell stories to make sense of events, to entertain, to connect with others, or to explain who they are. These stories vary in complexity and depth. Some are told in passing—casual remarks about the day. Others are deeply rehearsed and repeated across years, shaping not only how the story is remembered but how the person remembers themselves. Kottler shows that memory is inseparable from narrative. What people recall is not just a set of facts but a shaped version of events, edited and retold until it fits a sense of self or purpose. Therapists, according to Kottler, are professional story-workers. They are trained not just to listen but to guide. They help clients question old narratives and try on new ones. Sometimes a therapist challenges a harmful story, other times they listen long enough for the client to revise it themselves. But the work is not one-sided. Therapists are also changed by the stories they hear. Listening to others forces them to reflect on their own experiences, often uncovering truths they had not fully faced. Kottler also warns of the dangers of 'destorification'—the loss of meaningful narrative in contemporary life. With social media, fast communication, and shrinking attention spans, people risk losing the depth and reflection that stories once offered. Quick posts and filtered photos replace sustained reflection. Still, he argues, the need for storytelling remains. Humans crave meaning, and stories continue to be the best way to find it. Even beyond therapy, stories play a crucial role in families, friendships, culture, and identity. Through myth, parable, or personal memory, people pass on values and wisdom. Stories teach, warn, inspire. They allow people to rehearse danger, explore emotion, and discover who they might become. Kottler's message is clear: stories are not just entertainment. They are tools for survival, empathy, and growth. In learning to tell better stories—or to listen more carefully to the ones already being told—people gain the ability to change themselves and others.

Honest markers of the self

In 'The Secret Life of Pronouns[152]', James W. Pennebaker explores how the smallest and most overlooked words in language—pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and articles—offer profound insights into human psychology. These 'function words' are not about the topics people talk about, but about how they think, feel, and connect with others. Although they represent only a fraction of the total vocabulary, they dominate daily speech. Pennebaker's

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[151] Kottler, J.A. (2014) Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[152] Pennebaker, J. W. (2011) The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

research reveals that patterns in these words can predict personality traits, emotional states, social dynamics, and even deception. Rather than focusing on grammar or formal linguistics, the book centres on how language acts as a psychological mirror. Pennebaker and his team developed a tool called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to systematically analyze large bodies of text. This software helped researchers examine how pronoun use changes across contexts, moods, and relationships. One striking finding is that people who use 'I' more often tend to be less powerful in social settings, not more self-assured. Leaders often reduce their use of 'I', signalling distance or control, while followers tend to increase it. The way people use language also changes under stress. During personal crises, function words shift noticeably. Those experiencing depression, for instance, use more first-person singular pronouns and fewer words that signal social engagement. People who lie tend to use fewer 'I' words, distancing themselves from the false story they are telling. The structure of speech—what is omitted as much as what is said—reveals the speaker's mental and emotional state. Pennebaker's research goes beyond individual psychology. Function word analysis has been applied to political speeches, literature, therapy transcripts, and social media. In politics, the way a candidate speaks can reveal underlying confidence, anxiety, or deception. In relationships, pronoun shifts between partners can indicate emotional closeness or detachment. Even literary style can be examined through pronoun patterns, shedding light on authorship and character development. Language patterns can also predict the trajectory of relationships. In studies of couples, those who used similar language styles were more likely to stay together. This matching, or 'language style synchrony', reflects unconscious alignment between people. It signals mutual understanding and compatibility, even when the speakers are not aware of it. These subtle cues, often invisible to conscious awareness, carry important information about human connection. The implications of this work stretch into health, education, law enforcement, and artificial intelligence. Analysing the way someone speaks can assist in early diagnosis of mental illness, improve therapy outcomes, or detect manipulation. In online spaces, language tracking can help detect bots, assess group dynamics, or measure changes in collective mood. Pennebaker shows that language is not just a way to express ideas—it is also a way to reveal what lies beneath them. The tiny, forgettable words are the most honest markers of the self. What people choose not to notice in their language may say more than the stories they think they are telling.

Tyranny of writing

In 'Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word[153]', editors Constanze Weth and Kasper Juffermans explore how writing, often seen as a neutral tool, exerts deep influence over how language is understood and used. They take the idea of 'tyranny' not to suggest that writing is bad, but to highlight how it shapes linguistic norms, governs access to knowledge, and reflects power structures in society. Their argument draws from Ferdinand de Saussure's critique of writing as a distorting mirror of spoken language—an imperfect system that often misleads scholars and everyday speakers alike. Writing, they argue, has long been associated with power. Historically, it enabled the birth of legal systems, bureaucracies, and religious institutions. Thinkers like Jack Goody credited it with enabling abstract thought, while others, like Roland Barthes, praised it for detaching meaning from authorship. But this same power has created social divisions. Literacy has often been a privilege, restricted to elites and used to exclude others. Even today, gaps in literacy mirror global inequalities, with some societies still lacking broad access to written communication. Both Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield criticised how

[153] Weth, C. and Juffermans, K. (eds) (2018) Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word. London: Bloomsbury.

written language dominates linguistic theory. Writing, they noted, is artificial and stable, unlike the living, changing nature of spoken language. Yet even as they made these critiques, they reinforced the very dominance they questioned by relying on writing in their own analyses. This paradox is at the heart of the book's argument: writing is a tool, but it is never just a tool. It becomes a gatekeeper. Paulo Freire famously viewed literacy as a path to liberation. But Weth and Juffermans show that writing can also reinforce dominance, particularly through the standardisation of grammar and orthography in schools. Teaching 'proper' language often marginalises local dialects, informal styles, and oral traditions. Writing becomes a way to police language, defining who speaks 'correctly' and who does not. Contemporary research challenges the divide between speech and writing. New Literacy Studies suggest that literacy is not a single skill, but a set of practices shaped by culture, class, and context. Studies of 'grassroots literacy' show how ordinary people use writing in informal, creative ways that resist official norms. The digital world complicates things further, blending writing with speech in texts, chats, and social media posts. In these spaces, literacy looks different—less formal, more dynamic. The book includes rich case studies. In France, state education policies pushed standardised French at the expense of regional languages like Breton. In colonial Sudan, writing systems were used to enforce racial hierarchies. In Sri Lanka, English fluency still marks class status, even among national figures. These stories show how writing intersects with politics, identity, and inequality. Writing can unify and divide, liberate and dominate. It plays a central role in shaping how people speak, learn, and live.

How is the internet changing writing

The internet has transformed writing by making it more informal, concise, and globally accessible, while also introducing new genres like blogging and microblogging. It encourages conversational tones, rapid communication, and collaboration through multimedia and real-time tools. Writing online fosters interaction, creativity, and cultural exchange, even as it challenges traditional standards. While critics see a decline in formality, others view these shifts as an evolution of language adapting to digital life. The internet has redefined not only how people write, share, and shape meaning, but redefined people themselves. In his essay 'How Is the Internet Changing Literary Style?[154]', Caleb Crain examines how the web is reshaping not just how people write, but how they think, read, and perform themselves through text. He begins by noting that while the internet offers a vast space for writing, surprisingly little fiction or poetry is crafted specifically for it. Most online writing, he observes, is quick, reactive, and attention-driven—traits that contrast sharply with traditional literary prose, which expects more patience from the reader. Crain uses an example from Philip Larkin's novel 'Jill', describing a quiet moment of reflection as a boy rides a train to college. This kind of writing, calm and observational, would likely fail to hold attention online. On the internet, readers expect speed, movement, and stimulation. They do not settle into slow, descriptive passages. They want immediacy—content that talks back, entertains, or delivers a jolt. The digital reader often skims rather than dwells. So online prose tends to shift its tone to something more casual, attention-seeking, even desperate. Crain reflects on blogging and notices that what succeeds online often does so not because of its quality but because it connects to a shared conversation. Timeliness, controversy, and group identity matter more than craft. The pull of online writing lies in validation and community. Even mistakes are tolerated if they feel authentic or emotionally resonant. This craving for visibility and interaction shapes tone, making online writing sound more like a chat than a crafted narrative. Reading online also feels different. It lacks the sense

[154] Crain, C. (2010) How Is the Internet Changing Literary Style? The New Yorker.

of leisure associated with books. Instead of immersive pleasure, it resembles work—flicking through posts, following links, keeping up. Crain likens this to scratching an itch. Reading no longer offers escape but feeds a cycle of mental overstimulation. You do not finish online reading refreshed; you leave it more distracted. Drawing from Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation, Crain argues that online writing is also a form of performance. The internet, with its collapse of public and private boundaries, pushes writers to always be 'on'. Unlike print, where a writer could step away, online writing is continuous and exposed. It encourages people to present rougher, more immediate versions of themselves, not because they want to, but because the medium demands it. There is no backstage anymore—everything is on display. This constant exposure affects the depth of communication. Without privacy or separation between audiences, nuance fades. Everyone has a voice, but the quality of dialogue can suffer. Goffman's ideas about tact and mystification—ways to preserve dignity and space—are hard to apply online. Crain worries this flattening may feel democratic but erodes the structures that once protected thoughtful writing. He closes with a reference to Adorno, who warned that intimacy without distance leads to estrangement. The web, by eliminating space between us, may weaken the careful balance between presence and solitude that once allowed literature to flourish. Writing once required a pause, a journey through silence and distance to reach its reader. Online texts arrive instantly, collapsing travel into exposure and leaving no time for the space that gives words their depth.

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